

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1984

GEOGRAPHY
Minnesota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$1M - \$4,999,999

LEADER
Marisa Cummings



INNOVATION STORY

No

1

MINNESOTA
INDIAN WOMEN'S
RESOURCE CENTER

A REFLECTING MIRROR FOR NATIVE FAMILIES

STORY BY

Marcie Rendon



MINNEAPOLIS

MINNESOTA

Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center empowers Native women and their families as a means to combat the forces of colonization and systemic violence. Its programs provide a wide range of supports and are all guided by traditional Indigenous values.

Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center

MIWRC was the first organization in Minnesota to focus on responding to the needs of Native women and has made a significant difference in transforming how a variety of systems serve Native communities.

**BREAK
THROUGH**

While many organizations focus on either community support or reforming systems, MIWRC does both: delivering an array of services to urban Native Americans in the Twin Cities, and also driving broader systems change in the areas of child/family services, mental health, affordable housing, chemical dependency, cultural resilience, and historical trauma, among others.



**ALL ARE
WELCOME**

MIWRC deepens its community impact by ensuring both clients and staff are seen and heard for who they are — listening closely to their needs and finding ways to meet them.



**BUILDING THE SPIRIT,
BUILDING CONSENSUS**

MIWRC ensures that all of its staff at every level has an understanding of historical trauma, and that all of its healing programs are imbued with a tradition of spirituality. It also encourages its partners to adopt similar approaches to care and community understanding.

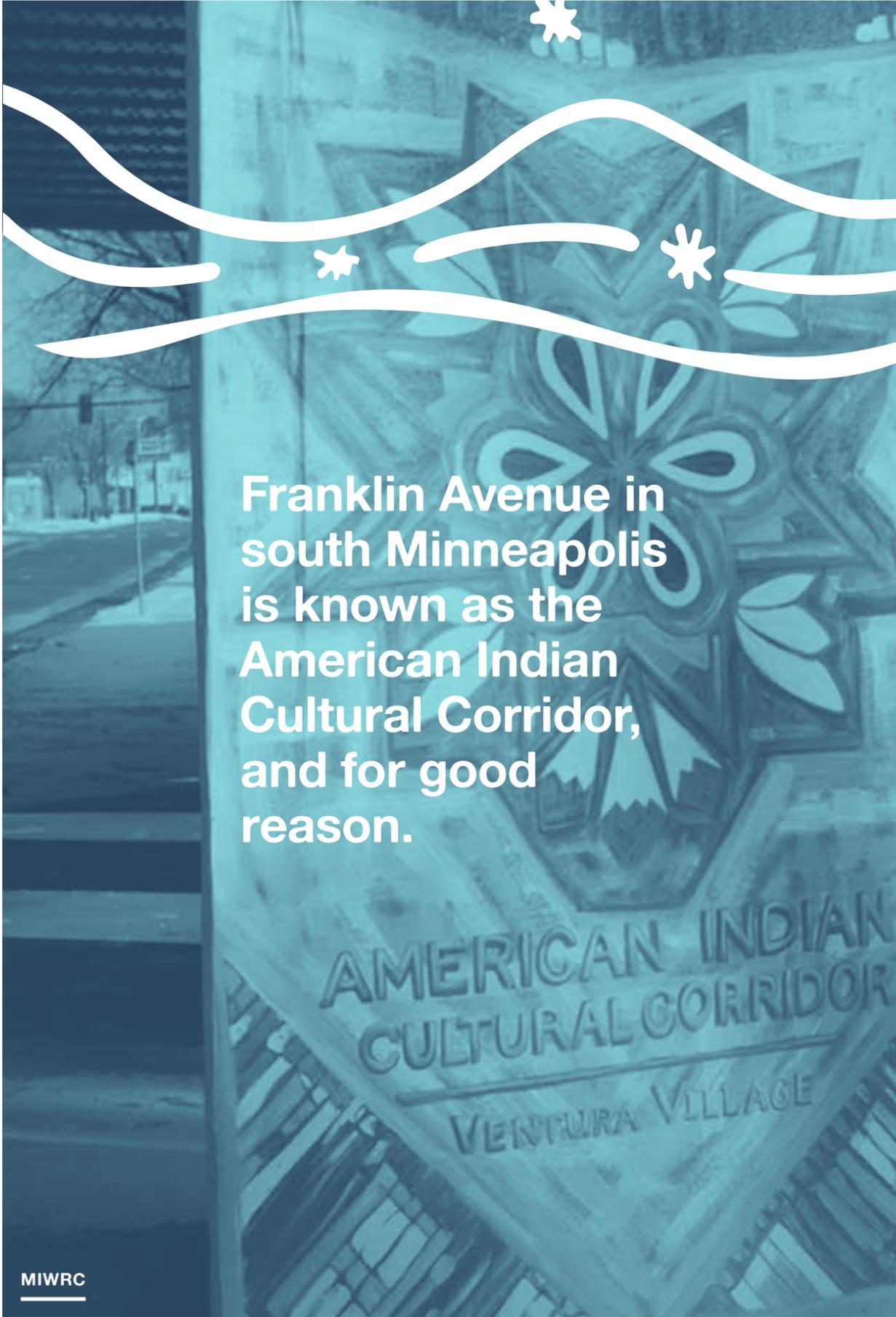


**OUR JOURNEY
TO HEALING HAS
ALWAYS BEEN TO
MEET PEOPLE**

**where
they are.**

Lisa Skjefte

Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center



Franklin Avenue in south Minneapolis is known as the American Indian Cultural Corridor, and for good reason.

MIWRC

The Minneapolis American Indian Center holds down the corner of Bloomington and Franklin. You can walk from there to the Anishinabe Wakiagun supportive housing facility in one direction, and in the other, to Pow Wow Grounds Coffee Shop and the Native American Community Development Institute Art Gallery. A short distance away, right up Bloomington, is Fond du Lac Mashkiki Waakaigan Pharmacy and All Nations Church. From there, you could head east to catch the corners of the Little Earth Housing Projects. Go west, and you'd find an unassuming three-story brick building, nestled in the heart of Indian Country in the Phillips Neighborhood of south Minneapolis.

Inside that brick building, what began in 1984 as a Native, female-focused training center and resource library for educating service providers around the state is now a model program that resists colonization and systemic violence by empowering Native women and their families. Within those walls,

the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center (MIWRC) has grown to encompass several programs that serve the needs and uplift the spirit and well-being of the individuals who utilize those resources.

These programs are a mirror for hundreds of Native individuals and their families who may not be able to see positive images of themselves reflected in the world around them.

MIWRC PROGRAMS HELP THEM TO LEARN AND REINFORCE THEIR OWN POWER

to create change for themselves, and for others.



**ALL ARE
WELCOME**

WE CHALLENGED TRADITIONAL
NORMS AND IDEAS
**and created
a community
virtually.**

Lisa Skjefte

Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center



MIWRC programs have been developed to reflect the needs of families and are tailored to address issues that significantly affect their well-being; affordable housing, chemical dependency, mental health care, cultural resilience and healing, and other family and community issues.



Administration and staff, who experienced massive restructuring over the course of 2020, also persevered through major changes in leadership as well as adjusting to the local realities of a global pandemic. Part of that adjustment: taking the spirit of community from the in-person to the virtual. To do that, MIWRC committed to pushing beyond past constraints.

THEY ASKED THEMSELVES:

What are new forms of tradition that can be in line with the original teachings of Native people?

“It was thought that our people couldn’t meet the challenges of going online,” says a, vice president of Kinoomaage Wii’gaming (Place of Learning). The Kinoomaage Wii’gaming program provides an online space where Native participants can learn and participate in the culture and ceremonies of their people. “We challenged traditional norms and ideas and created a community virtually. Our journey to healing has always been to meet people where they are.”

At MIWRC this has meant utilizing social media to build capacity in the community by making traditional teachings available

communitywide. It has hosted virtual events that teach moccasin making, online storytelling events, a Women’s Traditional Society event, and a Haudenosaunee Three Sisters Seed Saving teaching event. The organization sent “kits” out to participants prior to the online events so they could fully participate in the teachings.

Clients of Healing Journey — a peer-led support program for Native women challenged by chronic mental health, substance abuse and trauma histories — were given tablets with Wi-Fi hotspots to further increase community capacity to engage.

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 1

Marginalized communities and community members often do not have a voice in programming and decisions that impact them.

How can organizations work to include the voices of the community members served?

Such organizations can and must meaningfully incorporate members of the community in all levels of organizational operations, including leadership positions and other staff and board appointments where decision-making will occur. While many organizations employ community members for direct-service work (and no one disputes the merit in that), far fewer actively recruit and hire qualified community representation for executive-level positions such as president/CEO or executive director, program development and supervisory staff, and key finance and administrative positions. Boards also benefit from being comprised of a majority community representation. To do this requires a willingness for organizations that have not previously been headed by community representatives to yield traditional positions of power and acclimate themselves to being directed in new ways and perhaps by new people. This is a good thing — it’s drawing upon community expertise and helps pave the way for long-term community leadership in both organizational structure and service provision.”

Laura Jones
GRANTS AND CONTRACTS MANAGER,
MIWRC

MIWRC IGNORED THE OUTSIDE DOUBTS and proved that the use of new technology can be an ongoing tool in engaging Native communities for growth and healing.

Marisa Cummings, CEO, states that MIWRC programs are built on research into successful programs in Indigenous communities worldwide, reaching as far as Samoa and New Zealand. This connection and research helps keep MIWRC up to date with global innovation and lets the organization keep what works for its local urban, tribal community and throw out what doesn't — a practice common in Native communities since the arrival of other cultures on their lands.



MIWRC has a documented history of building relationships with other community and state organizations to work together on behalf of clients and family. There is also a history of building and maintaining relationships with individuals who are served by MIWRC.

What process can organizations utilize to build and maintain relationships in a sustainable way?

“MIWRC was created by Indigenous people specifically to address community-identified needs, with the knowledge that no one organization can do everything and that relationships are key to creating and maintaining quality community-based programming. As a community-built agency, MIWRC has naturally been able to draw upon the strengths of our client relatives, particularly given the close-knit nature of the Minneapolis urban Native community. The cultural value placed on relationships and relationship-building has also served as a grounding point both between MIWRC and other Native agencies and between MIWRC and dominant-culture entities such as the State of Minnesota Department of Health or the Hennepin County Adult Corrections Facility. The process of relationship-building is more or less the same regardless of whether it's between individuals or organizations — recognize the value in each other, be honest about what is needed and what can realistically be provided, and then go forward with integrity and accountability.”

Laura Jones
MIWRC



BUILDING THE SPIRIT, BUILDING CONSENSUS



WE ARE LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF
THE WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY
**and listening to
what they say
they need.**

Lisa Skjefte

Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center



Spirituality is a key component of all healing traditions at MIWRC and is considered integral to the success of its programming.

For the Native community, spirituality is not religion — it is both a way of life and a way of understanding life. Each culture has a spiritual component, but it is often one of the first things stripped by the dominant culture.

MIWRC ENCOURAGES EVERYONE, AND ALL OTHER PROGRAMS IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, to nurture the human spirit and the spirituality of each human.

That approach sets MIWRC apart in the nonprofit landscape. Many organizations focus their work and messaging around the challenges facing the communities they serve, often positioning the organization as a savior or enabler of change. MIWRC shows that this model can (and should) be abandoned, in favor of one that centers on and grows from people's resilience. MIWRC's holistic model of seeing and meeting people where they are encourages staff, administration and clients alike to see the possibilities of the client, rather than remaining stuck in a model that highlights deficits over strengths. "We can stay true to who we are and still create more access," says Lisa. "Adaptation can be done in a respectful manner."

MIWRC BALANCES THIS POSITIVE APPROACH WITH A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF what their clients are bringing with them.

Each person on the MIWRC staff, whether in direct service, administration or leadership, has a solid understanding of the concept of historical trauma — a term that refers to cumulative, multigenerational trauma typically experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group. This understanding includes acknowledging that the generational circumstances of everyone coming through the door needs to be considered when developing a plan for healing. "We are listening to the voices of the women in the community and listening to what they say they need," says Lisa.



How can organizations work cooperatively and collectively to craft a shared vision for the larger community they serve

based within the values of the community?

I think this requires commitment amongst all participating partner organizations to prioritize the community's vision and values over individual organizational concerns about growth potential and reputation. It's a struggle, because we are all operating from a scarcity model that leaves us competing amongst ourselves for resources even as resource holders encourage or require community collaborations and inter agency partnerships. However, if we really do believe that grounding in our communities' values and gifts is key to healing and thriving, we will strive to put aside competition in favor of sharing resources, honestly identifying gaps and strengths in our individual agency programmatic offerings and building the trust necessary to share the work involved in meeting community challenges as a united front. We have to believe in that collective strength enough to heal our own organizational hurts if we are to model that healing for our communities."

Laura Jones
MIWRC



MIWRC intends to continue to use all available resources to build future capacity in ways that mirror the needs of its community.

GENERATIONS OF SUPPORT

The organization has a history of learning Western modalities and adapting them to the teachings of Native traditions, seeing people as the unique and precious human beings they are and seeing their potential instead of their deficits.

IN THIS WAY, MOST PEOPLE SEEKING HELP WOULD SEE THAT HELP TAKE A FAMILIAR FORM

help that mirrors their identity and experience. Human being to human being.
