



Tribal Consultation Summary Report
May 5, 2026
In-person Consultation

Pursuant to the First Things First (FTF) Tribal Consultation Policy and Arizona Revised Statutes section 41-2051, FTF convened a formal consultation session on Tuesday, May 5, 2026. The purpose of the consultation was to receive feedback on improving early childhood systems in partnership with tribal communities.

FTF is committed to meaningful consultation with tribes through which elected officials and other authorized representatives of the tribal governments have the opportunity to provide meaningful and timely input regarding the development of policies or procedures that affect tribes in Arizona, specifically Native American young children and their families.

Participants

Tribal Leaders and Representatives

Gabriel Lopez, Chairman, Ak-Chin Indian Community
Victoria Corlett, Education Division Director, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation
Betsy Lewis, Child Care Director, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe
Nada Celaya, Council Member, Gila River Indian Community
Alyana Jimerson, Assistant General Counsel, Gila River Indian Community
Sybil Hanna, Council Member, Havasupai Tribe
Mikah Kewanimptewa, Vice Chairman, Hopi Tribe, *(written comments submitted)*
Chira Walema, Child Care Director, Hualapai Tribe
Jose Enrique Saldana, Council member, Pascua Yaqui Tribe
Annette Leyva, Tribal Administrator, Pascua Yaqui Tribe
Mikah Carlos, Council Member, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community
Saundra Lopez, Early Childhood Education Coordinator, Tonto Apache Tribe
Patrick Andrews, Executive Education Director, Tohono O'odham Nation

First Things First Board and Staff

Francisco Muñoz, FTF Board Indigenous Representative
Melinda Gulick, Chief Executive Officer
Candida Hunter-Querta, Chief Tribal Relations Officer

In addition, Hon. Richard Weiss, an FTF Board Member, FTF staff and representatives from other state agencies and organizations were in attendance to observe the consultation.

SUMMARY

The purpose of the consultation was to receive feedback from tribal leaders and representatives on improving early childhood systems in partnership with tribal communities. The following summary reflects input and suggestions provided by tribal leaders and representatives.

First Things First (FTF) was created by Arizona voters twenty years ago - in 2006 - to expand and enhance the early childhood programs and services that help young children arrive at kindergarten prepared for success. FTF is Arizona's only public funding source dedicated exclusively to early childhood, the beginning of our state's education continuum. The statewide First Things First Board and regional partnership councils in local communities across Arizona share the responsibility of ensuring that early childhood funds are invested in strategies that will improve outcomes for young children.

As FTF celebrates twenty years of serving young children and their families, this commitment to babies, toddlers and preschoolers stands strong today. The support and participation of citizens across the state has been key to the continued success of FTF, and it is especially important now. Declining tobacco tax revenue, the agency's primary funding source, continues to create challenges and impacts the level of service that FTF can provide. This challenges us to reimagine how we work, increasing our efficiency to deepen our impact on young children and their families.

The FTF State Board recently adopted a reduced budget to begin in State Fiscal Year 2028 (July 1, 2027). In addition, the Board updated its discretionary allocation policy to help mitigate impact to service delivery in rural areas and approved moving from a 4-year funding plan cycle to a 3-year funding plan cycle beginning in SFY28. Furthermore, FTF has undergone an agency-wide restructuring that affects every department and has reduced staff to approximately 100 full-time, permanent positions. The restructure includes a newly expanded Tribal Relations team, which now includes a Tribal Area Director and Tribal Regional Specialists.

FTF recognizes the need to receive insight from tribal leaders to help inform how the Tribal Relations team moves forward. FTF requested input from tribal leaders and representatives on the following:

- What barriers exist that make it difficult to partner with FTF?
- What can the Tribal Relations team do to improve FTF's approach to communication or engagement to better support young children and their families in tribal communities?
- What other state agencies are you working with to support young children and families?
- Regional partnership councils are responsible for determining priorities for young children and families. What are the top two needs for babies, toddlers and preschoolers and their families in your community?
- As regional councils begin their strategic planning, they will be tasked with doing more with less because of the funding decline. Working with partners on systems building efforts to supplement direct services will be even more important. What systems building efforts could regional councils focus on to better support young children and families?

- FTF has moved from a 4-year strategic plan to a 3-year strategic plan which will begin July 1, 2027. In some tribal communities, the tribe receives FTF funding to implement a program such as home visitation. What timing considerations should FTF be aware of in terms of contract approvals?
- In the past, tribal leaders have found it helpful to have resolutions or agreements in place that provide information on roles and responsibilities. As FTF considers developing agreements to enhance relationships with tribes, what relationships or processes should be included?

Tribal leaders and representatives shared that there are minimal to no barriers to partnering with FTF. In addition, they also shared the barriers and challenges that may be experienced within their community related to the implementation of FTF-funded programs and services:

- Hiring and retention of staff
- Communication gaps
- Duplication of services
- Missing data for a comprehensive regional needs and assets report
- Data sharing limitations
- Lack of clarity of roles and expectations
- Voices not being heard from tribes participating in a larger region
- Lack of representation from communities off the reservation, and
- Screening requirements.

They recommended that FTF better coordinate services, build upon current understanding of tribal processes and structure and increase the engagement and local presence of tribal regional specialists. In addition, regarding communication, leaders shared that communication must be culturally responsive and relationship-based. They suggested being mindful of when to share information while also providing timely updates and consider developing a newsletter. They also shared the importance of having clearly defined and easy-to-understand goals of FTF.

Tribal leaders and representatives shared that they work and partner with other agencies such as their local school districts, Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), Department of Economic Security (DES), Arizona Department of Education (ADE), Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (ITCA), Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Arizona Tribal Workforce Development Board (ATWDB), University of Arizona's Cooperative Extension and Wassaja Carlos Montezuma Center to support young children and their families. Needs and priorities identified in tribal communities include access to timely developmental screenings, language revitalization, comprehensive health services, family support, parenting education, special education services, recruitment and retention of special education professionals, expansion of child care services and early learning programs and basic needs.

The suggested system change efforts that regional councils can focus on include the following:

- Securing child care scholarships
- Support for developing and expanding child care centers
- Collaborating with all early childhood providers
- Implementing referral systems

- Sharing resource guides
- Integrating data systems
- Coordinating across agencies
- Hosting community-wide events to support children
- Increasing awareness of FTF services
- Connecting with other regional councils, and creating regional councils that include related tribes.

When entering into contracts or agreements with tribes, FTF should be aware that the fiscal year of the tribe may be different and approvals may be needed from multiple levels of decision-makers.

Furthermore, when developing agreements with tribes it was recommended to include the updated FTF organizational chart, roles and responsibilities of the Tribal Relations team and partners, point of contact form, outreach form, data sharing agreements, communication protocol, decision-making process, accountability measures and outcomes.

Barriers that exist that make it difficult to partner with FTF

- Tohono O’odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews recognized the restructure of the agency and appreciates the expansion of the Tribal Relations team, as it plays a big role in system change. He shared that there are minimal barriers in partnering with FTF. He continued that the internal barriers within the Nation that may impact the work with FTF are the need to build capacity for qualified personnel to deliver services and the location of early learning centers in remote areas affects hiring and retention.
- Ak-Chin Indian Community Chairman Gabriel Lopez also shared that there are no issues in partnering with FTF and they are pleased with the partnership with FTF.
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos shared that the internal challenges of the Community and within in the region are communication gaps, information not being shared in time, missing information needed for the (RNA) report, data sharing limitation, confidentiality barriers, capacity constraints, duplication of services, limited clarity in roles and expectations, unclear boundaries, engagement approaches not reflecting the needs of the community, and retention of staff who have historical knowledge. In addition, she also shared that the (regional needs and assets) report is a valuable resource and the Community heavily relies on the report.
- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema thanked FTF on behalf of the tribe. They appreciate the support given to the tribe and the development of the tribal relations team to better understand tribal government and needs. The only concern stated was for the tribes participating within a larger region; their voices may not be heard and it is recommended to increase awareness that tribes can have their own regional council.
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe Council Member Jose Enrique Saldana also shared that community members who reside in Guadalupe, which is located within Maricopa County rather than Pima County, may not be heard or represented within the regional council. The population in Guadalupe is growing and has the second-largest population of the tribe. In addition, members in Guadalupe

are experiencing the same challenges that are being experienced by members on the reservation.

- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Education Division Director Dr. Victoria Corlett stated that the barrier they experienced were the screening requirements that are part of the implementation of home visitation services. She explained that some of the ASQ questions and the question regarding domestic violence turned away families. In response, they worked with the region to allow for meeting families where they're at. A current barrier she shared is missing data due to confidentiality and the RNA report is not a comprehensive report because tribal data is not always available.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa shared that not understanding tribal government systems, authority and protocols, cultural norms, values, and history may be barriers to partnering with FTF. In addition, not understanding unique community needs such as infrastructure, jurisdictions, health and economic disparities, and understanding the challenges of living in a rural community setting can be barriers.

How tribal relations can improve communication or engagement to better support young children and their families in tribal communities

- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema suggested additional engagement and support during strategic planning to ensure services will meet community needs.
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos recommended having someone working in the community who can establish consistent touchpoints with program leadership, provide points of contact and streamline culturally responsive communication pathways, be familiar with the Community to understand nuances of oversight leadership including the education board, council and the multiple levels of decision makers and provide timely updates and information about funding changes.
- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews stated that the Nation has its own FTF regional council that expands from southern Arizona to Gila Bend across Tucson. He mentioned that FTF tribal relations may benefit from producing and maintaining a newsletter highlighting children and communities that they serve. In addition, to foster an open line of communication and an open approach to dialogue, FTF should state clearly defined and easy-to-understand goals, and build support from the community.
- Ak-Chin Indian Community Chairman Gabriel Lopez shared that communication may get lost and it's important for leadership to share information with those who work with young children. He also stated that leadership tends to rely on early childhood directors and educators for information.
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Education Division Director Dr. Victoria Corlett thanked FTF for creating the tribal relation positions because the tribal regional specialist has already met with their home visitation program, and is determining ways to do outreach and incorporate culture into programming.
- Havasupai Tribe Council Member Sybil Hanna voiced that as a parent who received FTF-funded (home visitation) services, she had to pull her son from the program due to having a bad

experience. She would also like to see improvement within the program, a restart of the reading program, and increase in engagement and outreach within the reservation.

- Pascua Yaqui Tribe Council Member Jose Enrique Saldana concurred with others that communication may not funnel down through the layers of oversight and encouraged increased awareness and education on the roles and structure of the regional council and who serves on the regional council.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa shared that Tribal Relations should prioritize building trust through consistent in-person engagement, practice cultural humility, and proactively engage with tribal partners. In addition, to align the early childhood system with cultural values and support solutions that are meaningful, sustainable and rooted in tribal strengths.

Working and partnering with other state agencies to support young children and families

- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews specified that the Nation is currently working with their school districts, which are part of the BIE, to provide resources to children and families. In addition, they are partnering with DES to establish an OEO to obtain workforce readiness training for families and are working with the Tribal Workforce Board that includes 19 tribes to secure funding for tribal members. Lastly, the Nation has partnered with Wassaja Carlos Montezuma Center to support the education continuum for children and address the needs of the region.
- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema said that the tribe works with ADE to provide nutritious meals to the Head Start and day care programs. In addition, ITCA puts together tribal early childhood working group meetings with their grantees, CCDF, FTF, and WIC. And they work with their school districts to manage IEP and AzEIP referrals.
- Fort Mojave Indian Tribe Child Care Director Betsy Lewis repeated that they also work with ADE, ITCA and their school districts. Director Lewis also shared that they work with (UofA) Cooperative Extension and they help with curriculum for physical development.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa listed that they partner with DES for child care assistance, nutrition program and child safety services; WIC provides nutritious food education, breastfeeding support, and health referrals. In addition, AzEIP provides services to children who may not be reaching appropriate milestone(s) for their age.

Identified top needs for babies, toddlers and preschoolers and their families in tribal communities

- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews shared that the Education Department has identified two top priorities, which are screening for young children and revitalization of the O'odham language. He further explained that in collaboration with their community college, they are developing language curriculum, training and certifying teachers and staff to utilize the curriculum in head start and three of their child care centers.
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos listed the Community's priorities which are access to comprehensive health and developmental services, timely screening, behavioral health, early intervention, consistent coordination, family support engagement system, parenting education, access to basic needs such as food, transportation,

housing, and strengthening family partnering in the early childhood system. Council member Carlos also mentioned that the community is undertaking a project called 5 and 5, which is focused on increasing life expectancy by 5 years in 5 years. FTF is identified as a partner in this project because of their connection with their youngest members.

- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema shared that lack of housing is a need due to multigenerational and crowded homes. She continued that FTF might assist in parenting education for first-time parents, promote language and cultural teachings, expansion of child care services and school readiness.
- Ak-Chin Indian Community Chairman Gabriel Lopez ranked parenting support classes and special service needs for young children as their top priority. He advocated that it is important to understand children with special needs and find ways for them to learn and be supported.
- Tonto Apache Tribe Early Childhood Educator Coordinator Sandra Lopez categorized special needs resources and expanding early learning centers for young children as a priority for the community. She said their preschool program currently serves ages 3 to 5, which is 18% of the population and they are hoping to expand resources for their facility and payroll.
- Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation Education Division Director Dr. Victoria Corlett stated that Fort McDowell resides in non-organized territory and their students are not assigned to a specific school which makes the Child Find process difficult. There isn't enough capacity for special education services and screening in the school districts; they recommend that timely screening services should be on FTF's radar. Another priority for the Nation is to support children and families by offering parent training and partnering with businesses to provide housing resources, household items, food boxes, and laundry services.
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe Council Member Jose Enrique Saldana echoed that there are similar needs within the reservation such as a need for expansion of school readiness, special needs assistance, recruiting and retaining staff members for special education, and resources for young parents such as a food pantry.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa shared that home providers, facilities, and qualified staffing for child care services are needed for both babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

Systems change efforts that regional councils can focus on to better support young children and families

- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews replied that during FY2025, their department of education reclassified teacher positions in Head Start and in FY2026, they reopened child care centers and established an MOA with the school district to provide child care services to the community. The Nation would like continued support from the Quality First program to help secure child care scholarships for their children and support from regional council members on their new child care center in Sells.
- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema suggested that the regional council can focus on working closely with all early childhood partners such as WIC, Head Start, child care, home visitation, IHS, and behavioral health. In addition, she suggested improving implementation of the referral system, sharing out the resource guide, and coordinating the early childhood provider meetings.

- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos responded that the regional council could focus on integrating data systems to improve coordination across agencies, a cross agency referral system to streamline access to services, workforce development and training pipelines for health, education, and family services, and community-wide health and screening events such as immunization, lead and hemoglobin screenings. In addition, a shared communication platform to improve collaboration across partners and working with the region's communication agencies to streamline communication efforts to increase awareness about FTF services.
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe Council Member Jose Enrique Saldana recommended that regional councils implement alignment meetings to ensure inclusion of the different layers of oversight and divisions, and share tribal priorities and best practices. In addition, regional councils should make connections with other regional councils due to the fact that there are growing numbers of tribal members living in other cities.
- Fort Mojave Indian Tribe Child Care Director Betsy Lewis shared her experience as a tribal representative of the tribe. She said she has a better understanding of her role working for both the tribe and county. She also works and learns from the other river tribes and recognizes the similar needs and challenges.
- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema proposed the possibility of related tribes creating their own regional councils due to tribes having similar challenges.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa suggested creating a centralized family resource center across Tribal Nations to coordinate resources (education, health, and social services) in one place and to not duplicate services. He also suggested strengthening data-sharing partnerships to promote tribal data sovereignty and to help identify service gaps to improve access to learning, health, and family support services. In addition, ensure that Tribal Nations have timely, accurate data to understand local needs, to design culturally grounded solutions, and deliver services.

Timing considerations that FTF should be aware of in terms of contract approvals

- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos responded that the Community's education operates on fiscal year starting October 1 and their grants operate off of the state fiscal year. Depending on where they are in the fiscal year, the Community is flexible to mid-year budget adjustments. Council member Carlos said to be aware of: how long it takes to get in front of the education board or council for approval, finance department turnaround time, and approval is needed for funding agreements. He can work with tribal regional specialists on understanding process and timeline. The Community education board meets every 1st and 3rd Monday of the month and the tribal council meets on Wednesdays for regular business meetings.
- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews replied that the majority of the Nation's budget renews on October 1 of every year and the agreements established with child care providers and vendors aligned with the timeline and conclude on September 30. In addition, there are options to amend the agreement to extend service dates and this process involves the executive and legislative branch.

- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa shared that tribes have specific timelines to follow and systems in place for approvals, and the Hopi Tribe has the DocuSign (DSOS) system which requires multiple levels of review and steps to complete. In addition, to be mindful of approval procedures and the tribe's established workflow.

Considerations for developing agreements to enhance relationships with tribes

- Hualapai Tribe Child Care Director Chira Walema suggested that the grant agreements include an updated organizational chart with the new restructure of FTF, roles and responsibilities of the Tribal Relations team, point of contact form, and outreach form. These documents would allow for tribal leadership to know who to contact at FTF.
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Council Member Mikah Carlos recommended that MOUs and resolutions should align with the tribal government structure, clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of all partners, including data sharing agreements that respect tribal sovereignty and confidentiality. In addition, agreements should outline communication protocols, decision-making processes, accountability measures, and share outcomes that are long term and sustainable, as well as provide flexibility to adapt to community needs and program changes.
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe Council Member Jose Enrique Saldana mentioned that there are opportunities for the tribal regional specialist to participate and consult with their oversight committee to promote consistent communication and to ensure priorities are at the forefront.
- Tohono O'odham Nation Executive Education Director Patrick Andrews shared an example of how agreements can be successfully modified and that agreements made with FTF should define the extent of ownership of materials produced through agreements. He concluded that the Nation will not surrender the review, authority or ownership of O'odham Ñiokĩ (language) related items to outside governments.
- Hopi Tribe Vice Chairman Mikah Kewanimptewa suggested a relationship-building process, communication expectations, clearly defined roles, and the ongoing involvement of the tribal regional specialist as a connector between FTF, tribal programs, and tribal leadership.