

Event Producer: Welcome and thank you for joining today's conference, FSIS Native American/Alaskan Native SEP Observance. Before we begin, please ensure you've opened the WebEx chat panel that has an associated icon on the bottom right corner of your screen. Please note that all audio connections are muted until the Q&A portion of the call. You are however welcome to submit written questions throughout the presentation and these will be addressed during Q&A. To submit your questions in writing, select all panelists from the drop down menu in the chat panel. Enter your question in the message box provided and send. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded. If you require technical assistance, please send a chat to the event producer. With that, I'm going to turn the conference over to Chief Operating Officer, Jeremy Todd Reed. Please go ahead.

Event Producer: Hello, and thank you for joining us today for a special emphasis program recognizing American-Indian and Alaskan natives. We are joined by Dr. T'karima from the Redhawk Nation American Arts Council. The Redhawk Native American Arts Council is a not-for-profit organization founded and maintained by Native American artists and educators serving the tri-state area. Since 1994, the council has been dedicated to educating the general public about Native American heritage through song, dance, theater, works of art and other cultural forms of expression. The council represents artists from North, South, Central American, Caribbean and Polynesian indigenous cultures. Redhawk Council produces four of the largest Native American heritage celebrations in the Northeast. The arts council also hosts festivals, workshops, theater presentations, and educational programs addressing stereotypes and fostering an awareness of native cultures from a historical standpoint, with a focus on contemporary cultural practices.

Dr. T'karima comes from New York and New Jersey. She is active in the Native American church and has been a Mexica dancer since 2001. She was born in California and is a mother of three boys. She received her bachelor's degree in ethnic studies from the University of California at Berkeley in 2005, Masters in Childhood Education from New York university in 2006, and earned a doctorate in education from the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College in 2011. And in that same year she enrolled and completed a six-month doula fellowship. Please join me in welcoming her to the program. Thank you

T'karima Ticitl: I wanted to just thank you all for having me here, T'karima my name in Wixárika translates to mother rain. The Wixárika people are one of the indigenous people, still very strong and alive and flowering all throughout Mexico and my family were Wixárika and Mashika and I grew up Xicana in California. I live now in New Jersey and I'm a certified licensed midwife in New Jersey and New York state. So usually we start off always introducing ourselves. So I just wanted to share that much prior to acknowledging the land. We usually have land acknowledgement, so wanted to stay here in New Jersey to the Lenape Ramapough people, [foreign language 00:03:41] thank you for, this is their home land and we always encourage people wherever it is that you live

throughout the United States, Turtle Island to try to find out who were the original people of that land and land acknowledgement can come in many ways.

We are very big on, my native people, relatives from Mexico, do a lot of offerings. We call them in Spanish "ofrendas." And so I want to open up with a gratitude song for mother earth, all throughout Turtle Island or Central South America, the world really. So I open up with it's a Nahuatl song. So Nahuatl is another of the indigenous languages still spoken by over a million people throughout Mexico, all the way down to Nicaragua and in New York, actually there's a big community of Nahuatl speaking people. So yeah, just open up with the gratitude song to our [foreign language 00:04:46] mother earth [foreign language 00:04:46], so that's just a gratitude song for mother earth, thankful to her that she continue to keep getting pregnant every day and give us everything we need from all the trees, all that wood, that fire to keep the fires in our home going, the fires in the altars going, the fires throughout the world going.

So we continue to have life, so just we're always thankful to the land and like opening and sharing songs. So wanted to start off like that. And just to share a little bit more about me. So my mother and father, they're both in the spirit world, Maria and Evelina Vasquez, and I'm mother of three children, three beautiful boys, Axayacatl, Kuauhteotl and Tletlhuitzin, all who were born in the temazkalli, which is a sweat lodge. I don't know if you've all been down to Mexico, but the temazkalli over there is usually, if you can picture like the igloo style, you got to crawl in. It represents the womb of mother earth and it's pitch black inside. There's a fire up there, it's a purification ceremony. So the temazkalli, that's where I birthed all three of my children, but actually in the South Bronx, in New York and then in Queens, my last two. So they are 15, 8 and 6, and yeah I just wanted to share about my three sons, Axayacatl, Kuauhteotl and Tletlhuitzin.

And so that's me, I'm a mother, a home birth midwife and [inaudible 00:07:28] Mexica. I don't know, maybe some of you have seen or familiar with what they call, the colonized name is Aztec dancing. The Mexica dancer with the big regalia, these are the [inaudible 00:07:39] that we use on the shells for our legs, rattles, [inaudible 00:07:44] that we pray with. So, just always proud of my culture, my people, the Mashika/Wixarika people, and then thinking of all, at least in the States thinking others. So there's a lot of indigenous people still today, but not everyone is "federally recognized."

There is colonialism, colonization has affected in many ways, but there are over 500 federally recognized indigenous people all throughout Turtle Island, the United States. So that's beautiful and always, we want our native relatives, all our relations, everybody to continue to live [inaudible 00:08:23], just want to acknowledge that because after 500 something years of colonialism of how the systems of power of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism have affected our people from genocide, massacres, miseducation, all these things like we're still alive, we're still taking a breath of life and still speak our native languages, have

our songs, have our ceremonies, have our traditions, have our foods, our sacred foods and all these sacred altars, from the TPE to the lodge, the [inaudible 00:08:58], the sun dances, moon dances, [foreign language 00:08:59], mini sacred ceremonies that are not on social media, that are still thriving, living, and we've had to like, a lot of our native elders took their life on the line for this, for us to continue to be able to just speak our language and pray and live and have ceremony, and some of them have lost their lives, some of them are incarcerated, some of them are still out there with their protest sign and protecting the water.

So just thinking about all the relations that way, and with this whole you know, I'm a midwife. A lot of my clients, moms, are in terms of next week, it keeps coming up all the time. Like, oh, Happy Thanksgiving and then they remember, and then they feel silly and they're like, oh, sorry, you don't celebrate that right. And then I just laugh. Cause I'm always like, we meet everyone half way right? There's all these holidays here in terms of thanks taking is what we call that day, Christmas, even New Year's, we have our own New Year's, every native person, tribe, nation, however you want to call them have their original people's names, but also their own New Year's. And so we just meet everyone halfway, but in terms of thanks taking next week, I just want to point out too always the importance of all of us always understanding the true history behind things, because people are like, oh, but who cares? It happened so long ago. And it's like, no, that, okay, maybe it's not genocide the way it has been with that whole massacring people, it wasn't a three day beautiful feast where the settlers and the Wampanoag people sat together. It was like, say what it is, it was a massacre, it was genocide.

It was like passing all those infections, diseases, like killing of a nation, but people are like, well we don't want to teach that to the children. I'm like, I have a PHD in education. I've learned that we can teach children anything as long as it's at their own developmental level. My thing is about always speaking truth, about living in respect, love, justice, peace. So, with thanks taking coming next week, I just wanted to acknowledge that 700 native people were massacred. It wasn't this pretty feast and everything that came along with that, it's not genocide like that, but it's still cultural genocide, as a midwife protecting land and life, it is my mission in life. Like, I've seen how the forced sterilization of our people that still happens today. It wasn't just in the 60s or happened years ago of indigenous, of brown or black, African-American, like women, people, whether on the reservations or off in Puerto Rico and Mexico, here, like in the prison system like that's cultural genocide, still trying to wipe out our people by forced sterilizations without their consent.

You know that's still connected to that. So, thinking about all those things of the genocide, the miseducation, the stereotypes, the changing of time, the changing of our names, the trying to wipe out our languages, distortion of everything, trying to get rid of us, it's really important to just take a moment and acknowledge that, aside all of that we're still here. We're still here, colonized

yes, speaking English and Spanish and whatever languages nowadays, but still trying to keep our languages alive through songs, through prayer, by learning with elders, by having a connection with the land, by giving birth naturally at home, or with like I did with my sons in the lodge, on the earth with a fire, natural, no drugs. And as I mentioned in my bio that I am part of the Native-American church.

Yes, we have a chapter, it's called [foreign language 00:13:13]. And some people are familiar with Peyote. It's a medicinal sacred medicine. Holy sacrament, the way we understand it. I've written a few books. One of my books of Birth is a Ceremony talked about the use of Peyote in pregnancy, in childbirth, postpartum, and there are thousands of books on peyote. You can go on the internet and Google, and it's going to say it's a drug, but no, it's a sacred medicine for our people. There's other drugs in the world that people use all the time, ibuprofen, things like that. And other things, those are drugs, but it's still like to each their own. So I just wanted to acknowledge to the medicine because after everything happening with the land, all this destruction, all these pipelines, all this like, just protests and our people still being attacked with chemical warfare and dying of cancer and things, because they know they were at Standing Rock and that they were hit with all whatever is in those chemicals, our people are still just fighting to live, fighting for peace, for justice, for water, the simple things of life right, for water. So just thinking of this whole month of Native American heritage month of November, just thinking about everybody, yeah it's important to talk about the dark part of the history, which is a living history, but it's really important and more important I feel to like smile and understand that we are still here aside everything and how to support indigenous causes and movements, whether it's through the healthcare system, through education, through all the missing and murdered indigenous women and people, all these pipelines Standing Rock line three, I'm part of the Red Spirit Women's Motorcycle Riding Club too, indigenous group of, it's open to everyone, but mainly indigenous women who ride. And we have auntie Pula from Hawaii, who's like the grandmother, it's the sister club to Redrum and she's out there with so many people in Hawaii, like protesting that telescope on the sacred mountain, Mauna Kea.

So, there's all these movements and that's what is important right? Like what can I do? What can I do to help, either spread awareness, education, funds are always needed, go out there, be on the front lines? It's our turn now, our elders have been doing that for many years. They lost their lives, incarcerated, are still living strong on the front lines and many and more of us like, that's always like, because people are like, they find out the tragedy, the history, always like white supremacy, racist things happening to our people. And then they're like, and then you get mad, but you have to transform that madness into, okay, what can I do to support indigenous people?, these causes, the movement, and stand in solidarity with black lives matter.

It's all related. As a midwife, I serve all people, but I tend to keep serving indigenous black, brown, red women, African-American women and it's important to just come together because we are facing like the same discriminations right and all that. So that's like, I wanted to share that, there were videos I'm sorry, we can't show them here, but there was. I say start off by finding always the true meaning of not just thanks taking, but any holiday what's going on currently, because I find a lot of people who are like, oh yeah, but that happened so long ago. Get over it. No, it's still happening today. And what do we really want? We just want to be respected as living beings, as human beings, as people and left alone to do what we have to do, pray with our sacred medicinal plants, have clean water.

We just want to drink clean water. And there's like all this killing around that. So, yeah, wanted to share that. And then just talk about natives all throughout Turtle Island, it's different everywhere we go. Like I learned years ago about the Peace and Dignity Journey, The Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor, there was a dream about out an elder in a sacred ceremony who it came to them that there was this need to reunite all indigenous people, and when I say indigenous, yeah, there's indigenous to north, central, south America, but we're all indigenous to somewhere. So it's a big prophecy of the Eagle Condor to unite all people, to keep living with love and respect with the land, with the elements, with creator, with the universe, with yourself, with your family. And so I remember they said 1992 marked the 500 years right.

So, ever since then, there has been a run every four years, The Peace & Dignity Journey Run. And I got to participate in 2004. Because of the pandemic, the last one was postponed, but it's coming the next one. And it was really beautiful because on that run, I started in California, parts of Mexico, I was a student in undergraduate at the time. So I had to pause and then I went back to school. Then I went and finished the prayer in Panama. But there are runners who start in Alaska and then there are runners who start in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, and all throughout the United States, and then like, everyone runs with these prayer staffs and those staffs carry, you all know birds, right? There's so many different types of birds, Eagles, Condors, water birds, red tail hawks, little Indian rollers, like whatever bird you could think of, these staffs that are made of different types of wood have all these feathers that are wrapped, and each feather carries a prayer, a prayer to relearn our language, to be able to pray with the medicine without being put in prison for carrying it, for a relative who has cancer, for a relative who got cancer because they were protesting for water rights, for a woman who has never been able to get pregnant for whatever reasons, so it's like constant, beautiful prayers and we carry those staffs and we run from native community to native community regardless of the weather, it could be 130 degrees through the desert, or it could be cold, snow, like we just keep running and then once the whole, from Alaska to Argentina, it's covered and meet in Panama.

There's a big closing ceremony there. And that's been the prayer that aside everything that's happening, we're going to continue to live with justice, with respect and continue birthing our children who are our ancestors and just keep it going and not just for natives, from the Americas, all the Americas, but from the world, and that's when the power is there, right? Like when we're all you understand that we're all indigenous to somewhere and been affected by similar issues because I meet people every day from different cultures and, and yes, it's different, but there are similarities, and at the end of the day, we all just want to be treated like living beings, human beings, with love and respect. And so that's really I want to say about that. And, I don't know, I can keep talking, talking, talking, but I want to share a few songs because prior to this, this cat here was sharing about the use really of coyote, the sacred medicine.

And, and I got to talk a lot about the TPE and the sweat lodge and how at least the past two years, everything has changed, everything's much slower. A lot of lives have been lost due to COVID and everything, but like, it has forced people to, I mean now things are changing and things getting better, but the past year or two, everybody was like forced to stay at home or be at home and just reconnect with your own loved ones, with your own family, with your roots, with your people, and cook at home, reconnect with the foods, because I feel like a lot of people eat out and everything and it's like food is medicine, it's sacred. It's what gives us life, keeps our temples, our bodies going. So, just thinking about all those changes that have happened, I wanted to share another song, a gratitude.

[foreign language 00:23:04].

So in that song is like, Omatayo in Nahua, it means, Ome means two and tayo is spirit. And, and so like, in most native languages, from what I've learned, talking to other relatives is that there's always the duality of both, right? So, I don't know, nowadays in the birth world, like a lot of people don't want to be called a woman or they use pronouns, other pronouns, she, her, they, then say like, but in native languages, like there's not those complications because it is that duality, right? Like even in Spanish, we'll say [foreign language 00:24:39], we give male/female characteristics to things, but in native languages, there's always that duality. Some people pray to the great spirit, creator, and other people might call the spirit God or he, and there's a bunch of different names for that energy, how you understand it.

But what I've seen and learned is that throughout native languages, there's always that balance, right. That duality, both acknowledge. So that song is like that. Thank you to the masculine, the feminine, the great spirit creator creation and then [foreign language 00:25:25] in Nahua also means it translates people say, thank you, but it really literally translates to with my mouth I say I love you, like gratitude right? So that song is just a simple like gratitude song. And that's really where I'm at and I feel because like, I get upset when my children come home from school and the teachers were telling them a different history in

terms of how Columbus discovered us, the whole Thanksgiving meal, or one time I had my son come home and say, why did you tell me that we came from the corn?

Because, he was at school telling the people, we have our creation stories that we come from the corn, from the stars, we're star beings, and that the kids were making fun of him because he was like, they said we come from monkeys and then like, he was so confused and I was like, look there are people who really believe they come from monkeys and then there's people who believe in the whole very straight and there are different, the Adam and Eve story, like there's different creation stories. So I told him, you go back to school and you tell them we are Wixárika/Mexica. We have our own creation stories. There's so many native peoples throughout the United States. They have their own creation stories. They come from the trees, they come from the sky world, and just always be open minded.

Like there is so many, I've never read the Bible completely, but there's so many beautiful stories there that are like, whoa, mind blowing right. So there are so many indigenous creation stories that are mind blowing, so why are some accepted and not the others right? So, yeah, so that's kind of where I'm always like open to listening, to everything, to everyone, but also just the importance of knowing who you are, where we come from and being proud of it, because I didn't grow up with like a bunch of teachings about my native roots, my history, I grew up as a foster care, water the cooler, child in the system. And there were other people amongst the way in the community that have given me teachings that should have come from my mom and dad, my grandma and grandpa like that.

And so I've learned that self-identification is important because when I, for many years in the school system with children, it was like a lot of them, whether they have their parents or not, still question who am I and where do I come from? Like I told my son too, or you can just keep it as simple and tell them you come from the water, you come from the sacred black waters in your mama's womb and you were there for 10 months and then you were born and you are a water being, so it is just the way you explain it is different, but for a lot of the children and students that have met throughout elementary, high school, even college, that's one of the big things like identity and there's interpersonal racism, institutional racism, internalized racism.

That's what I grew up a lot with too. I did know my grandma and she had all the nice brown skin native features, Petronilla was her name, the long hair like down to her knees. And she used to buy those white creams to try to like lighten her skin and was ashamed, the native way of life was like witchcraft, the worst of the worst, dirty, she grew up with those internalized stereotypes and internalized racism. And I see that still today with a lot of people, like they don't know who they are, they don't know where they come from, and even if they have the family, the family is like maybe confused or really colonized, but

there's a lot of prayers that have been put down, work that is being done to de-colonize the mind, the body.

So it matches your spirit, right. That's perfect. And yeah that's what I keep sharing to everyone is like really, really get to know who you are and biology, people are into those whole DNA things, the blood quantum, your family culture. Like they can't define who you are really. Like, I know so many people nowadays who are mixed and I feel self-identification is important. And I keep sharing the true importance of that, because then, I know people who are mix, I'm like, well, so and so my family maybe had this amount of indigenous blood, but you know, we're black or we're white, or my grandma had some French, like it's the whole mix nowadays and so you choose, choose it all, be all of it, but for those who like acknowledge the indigenous part and then connect to a language, to a food, to a ceremony, to a plant, like it is just beautiful.

It's beautiful. So that's really, aside all the genocide, all the miseducation, all the massacres, everything like, that's the beauty, right? To just continue to walk this path with love, with respect, integrity, and join the movement, join the movement. Because we know so many people from Standing Rock to the Mauna Kea, to the Line 3, to MMIW we need help. We need help with all of that because we want our people to continue to strive to be successful. And it's sad every time we hear a story of so and so was missing, so and so was murdered, and now they're doing this to the water over here. So, we need help. We need help from sharing education, awareness, being on the front lines, donations, funds, and just being one, being one with our mother earth, with the fire, with the water, with the elements of life, right. So, yeah, that's what is coming to mind. I can share another song.

Event Producer: Well If folks would like to ask questions, they are welcome to use the WebEx chat feature to do so, just go ahead and select all panelists from the drop down menu in the WebEx chat box, to submit your question, you can also use the raise hand feature in WebEx to virtually raise your hand. You'll hear a beep when your line is unmuted, at which point, please, and just go ahead and state your name and question. We did get a question that came in. The question was your story of your grandmother being ashamed of her heritage is heartbreaking, but not uncommon for the era. When did you gain your love for your heritage?

T'karima Ticitl: Yeah, it's true, it's very heartbreaking and a lot of people similar story over and over, I got out of the foster care system, emancipated at 17 and did my undergraduate at UC Berkeley. And I feel majoring in ethnic studies and just being in the Bay Area with a lot of members from the American-Indian Movement, the Black Panther Party, Brown Berets, like all those relatives really helped me to like really reconnect, and I remember doing a fast for 26 days outside of the Capitol when the Terminator was the Governor, we were demanding that all, like all the poorest school districts throughout the whole state of California have more access to funds and to not eliminate ethnic studies, Chicano studies, African-American studies, native studies, all that. So

we did that protest and I remember like somebody bringing some medicine, tea and sharing, and then it just like, it brought me back to a thought from my great grandma who had told us, we come from over here, this is our tribe, this is our people. One of you in the family has to pick it up, you know, that was her prayer.

So I feel, yeah, it was definitely going to school, to a university and meeting people in the community who are already walking the red room, were very connected to the native roots and like, bring me back for, I guess, circle, and then it like sparkling like, it takes one person, right. It just takes one person to help get you reconnected. So always thankful to all that community who becomes family and all those relatives who help us because we got to help each other, now that's my prayer that more youth, more people that aren't connected, that we help them to get there, to get back on track with their indigenous way of life or whatever way of life they choose.

Event Producer: All right. I'm not showing any other questions at the moment, again if you would like to ask your question verbally, just use the right hand icon in WebEx, or you can submit questions in writing where you can use the chat box on the right hand side of your screen, just remember to select all panelists from the dropdown menu before submitting your question.

T'karima Ticitl: Yeah, when are the other things that I'll share too is about when people see natives, us, and they're like, they do the whole woo-woo sign, like that's a stereotype, all those football teams with native mascots, it's also offensive, so thinking about all the stereotypes, yeah, some people go to school, learn about critical race theory and how to look at life through those lens, but it's just common sense sometimes. You got to, when we hear that, break that stereotype and teach people the truth because there are a lot of people out there doing the work and fighting, demanding change and respect, many times, I don't know where the child, they heard it somewhere, and they just make it up and they are repeating these stereotypes. So that's another important and big piece. Then that helps, it helps with our identity, with our way of life, with the simple things, like respect, right. So, I was also thinking about that, because that is always brought up and then the videos that we wanted, that we have for today, like there's one that really shows that throughout history, how there's been many, not just like football games, but a lot of elementary, high schools, different shirts and things that continue the stereotypes of our people. Any other questions, anything?

Event Producer: I'm not seeing any other questions at this time?

Aleesha Grady: Well, since there is no additional questions, hello everyone. My name is Aleesha Grady and I'm an equal employment specialist. I would like to thank you, Dr. T'karima from Red Health Counsel for speaking with us today, it was very insightful and thank you for sharing your story and also the history. In addition, I would like to thank Todd Reed for the opening remarks. I want to give a special

thank you to everyone, all employees that were able to join us today, this event will be recorded and provided at a later date on the civil rights staff website. Thank you all, having an amazing afternoon and continue to stay safe. Thanks for joining

Event Producer: That concludes our conference. Thank you for using event services. You may now disconnect.