



million

ONE JAIL AT A TIME.

story

E8S3 On Tribal Land, Banishment, Rehabilitation, and Re-entry Add Up to Justice

In Alaska, rising violent crime and substance abuse across the state have also increased incarceration rates among Native Americans. Making use of their legal sovereignty, some Alaska Native leaders issue “blue tickets,” documents that sentence offenders to legal expulsion. Journalist Emily Schwing reports on the consequences and cultural impact of banishment from Toksook Bay.

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PEABODY
NOMINEE



The Story

Tribal Banishment in Alaska illustrates how difficult reentry can be for the formerly incarcerated.

“In our culture, harmony is our number one goal for community. If you disturbed that harmony or be like a thorn, they'll tolerate that for as long as they can, and then kick you out.”

-Charles Moses, Toksook Bay Tribal Court Administrator

In Alaska, the rate of violent crime is three times the national average, and Alaska Native men make up nearly 40 percent of the prison population. In some tribal communities, disruptive members are issued a so-called “blue ticket,” a legal expulsion with no invitation to return.

This practice often occurs concurrent with incarceration—a violation that resulted in prison time can also result in tribal banishment. Which begs the question, where can that person go and how can they successfully reenter society if they can no longer return to their community?

In this episode of 70 Million, we meet David (not his real name), who was banished from Toksook Bay, was released from prison and flew 300 miles to nearby Bethel. But he couldn't enter the village where he grew up, and returned to Anchorage. There, he was soon arrested after having violated the conditions of his release.

Banishment is rare, and even people who have been banished can sometimes change their behavior and have the decision reversed.



Joe Asuluk (second from left) and Charles Moses (fourth from left) join other men and women from their community in Toksook Bay's multipurpose building. In Yup'ik culture, family is the unit. “When everybody [does] what they were supposed to do, it made surviving easier,” says Charles Moses. Photo: Josh Corbett

The Mission

Provide Native Americans who have been incarcerated with the tools to successfully re-enter society.



In January, Toksook Bay is blanketed by snow. The Bering Sea coastal community is one of four small villages on Nelson Island, more than 500 miles West of Alaska's largest city, Anchorage. Photo: Josh Corbett

“Native people... our way of life, culture, family, or community is our greatest strength and, you know, can really support resiliency and recovery.”

Jody Potts, Regional Director, Native Movement

For members of tribal communities, reentry after incarceration presents special challenges. In Alaska, for example, just getting home to remote villages that can only be accessed by boat or plane can be cost-prohibitive. Intergenerational trauma and alcoholism within families also present challenges. Advocates say that the healing practices enmeshed in Native American culture can be used as a source of strength, and that community ties can provide support systems that ease the transition.

The nonprofit organization White Bison offers training and support for recovery and reentry programs across the nation and the world. Each of their programs is tailored to a specific subcategory, be it youth, parental roles, or the individual's experience as a formerly incarcerated person. The trainings they provide can be applied in big cities and small towns anywhere. During the pandemic, they are also holding a weekly Zoom session open to the general public.

Their program for formerly incarcerated people, Warrior Down, is named for the cry used to indicate that someone has been wounded and needs the community to rally around them. A peer to peer program, Warrior Down provides a multifaceted support network that includes rehabilitation for those suffering from an addiction to drugs, gambling or alcohol, assistance applying for housing, educational opportunities and jobs, as well as healing circles and traditional spiritual ceremonies.

The mission is to equip more communities with this framework to ease reentry and reduce recidivism.

The Strategy

A multi-phase approach that incorporates coaching, leadership skill development, a 12-step recovery program and traditional healing



“We want to encourage people, to give them a chance. We don't want them to have to carry around the label of ex-convict....When they come home, we welcome them and have a naming ceremony for them and a community gathering to welcome them back, because they did their time and what they were supposed to do.”

-Kateri Coyhis, Executive Director of White Bison

The Warrior Down Program created by White Bison offers formerly incarcerated people the tools to have healthy relationships with their families, and, if necessary, to recover from addiction. The program accompanies people from the time they are in prison until they are successfully reintegrated into their communities, connecting them to a team of peer trainers and village elders. Ultimately, by arming them the life skills they need to be successful parents, workers, and role models, and making available service opportunities, the program supports them in breaking negative patterns and embrace the cultural traditions that provide support and strength.

Phase I: Re-entry programs can ideally begin within the prison setting, including 12-step recovery programs and Fathers of Tradition, a “traditional approach to learning principles and strategies for effective fathering for Native American men.”

Phase II: For those near release from prison, or in a halfway house, the second phase of Warrior Down is designed to connect individuals with the specific resources they need for success. These may include help finding work or educational opportunities, as well as support for mental and physical wellbeing. Members of the tribal communities serve as coaches to help them connect with these resources. Additionally, 12-step programs may continue during this phase.

Phase III: In the final phase, the individual returns to his or her home community equipped with the resources they gained access to in the previous phase. They continue to work on lifeskills, while also participating in traditional healing practices, engaging in talking circles, and learning how to positively interact with their families.

Toksook Bay's community center is often filled with locals of all ages. They play drums, and wave their dance fans during a weekly gathering to Yuraq – the traditional Yup'ik dance. Currently, fear about a COVID-19 outbreak means the community is not gathering regularly to share their traditional music and dance. Photo: Josh Corbett

Resources

Native American Reentry Services counts as its mission, “supporting our relatives during incarceration and in reentry back into our tribal communities.”

<http://www.nativereentry.org/>

White Bison provides training for tribal communities to help their members recover from addiction and successfully return home after incarceration. Their weekly Wellbriety meetings are open to the general public via Zoom. Information can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/whitebisoninc/>

White Bison also maintains a list of local meetings and recovery groups across North America:

<https://whitebison.org/WellBriety.aspx>

And offers training to implement the Warrior Down program:

<https://whitebison.org/files/Warrior%20Downflyer.pdf>

Specifically in Alaska, two weekly groups are available, in Juneau at the Tlingit and Haida Vocational Training Resource on Tuesdays at 6pm, and in Stebbins on Mondays and Wednesdays at noon for men and 1pm for women at the Friendship Qasiq, Stebbins VBC Office.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, residents in Toksook Bay gathered weekly in the local community building for Yuraq – traditional Yup’ik dancing and drumming. Among the men who play drums is Joe Asuluk (second from left) and Charles Moses (fourth from left). Photo: Josh Corbett



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