

CROW CREEK RESERVATION

Wiconi Wawokiya, Inc.
Project SAFE and The Children's Safe Place
Fort Thompson, South Dakota

Founded:	1985 (Project SAFE) and 1998 (The Children's Safe Place)
Service area:	358,361 acres (Crow Creek Reservation and the Lower Brule Lakota Reservation) located in south central South Dakota
Population:	3,500 people live on the Crow Creek Reservation
Source of funding:	federal, state, private donations
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Program Description

Wiconi Wawokiya, Inc., Project SAFE is a non-profit victim services organization located on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota. Any victim in search of safety is eligible for services. The crime victims who most often seek refuge from the organization are victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and child abuse. The overall mission of Wiconi Wawokiya is to reduce violence in the home, workplace, and schools. The staff and volunteers strive to empower individuals who feel oppressed and to educate people about domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. By informing people that these crimes are not a Dakota/Lakota tradition and by advocating for holding abusers accountable, Wiconi Wawokiya is providing leadership and inspiration to address issues of victimization locally and beyond, as it serves as a model for other tribes.

The staff of Wiconi Wawokiya (including six employees and five volunteers) work together to form a comprehensive team to provide direct

services to victims and education to the community. The staff provides the following services for primary and secondary victims:

- ◆ 24-hour crisis hotline.
- ◆ Crisis counseling.
- ◆ Shelter.
- ◆ Court advocacy.
- ◆ Protection orders.
- ◆ Emergency legal advocacy.
- ◆ Medical advocacy.
- ◆ Relocation assistance.
- ◆ Food/clothing/toiletries assistance.
- ◆ Transportation.
- ◆ Emergency financial assistance.

- ◆ Followup, information and referral.
- ◆ Victim advocacy.
- ◆ Forensic medical exams and interviews for child abuse victims.
- ◆ Mental health therapy.

Wiconi Wawokiya uses donations of clothes and household goods it receives from the community to help women and children begin new, safe lives. Often, victims will be hesitant to leave a violent situation because they have to leave behind their belongings. The Wiconi Wawokiya staff suggests that, “Your material goods can be replaced, but you cannot.” With that philosophy in mind, the staff locates resources to start a new, violence-free home, and ensures that the needs of every victim are met.

Wiconi Wawokiya participates in a tribal-federal-state multidisciplinary team (MDT) and was a key leader in its development. This MDT meets regularly to share information and discuss issues impacting child victims and their families. The child victims need support and safety, and their families may have cases in the legal system. This MDT has been recognized as a model for other Indian Country efforts due to the exceptional cooperation and collaboration between the participating agencies.

Increasing Safety for Victims

Wiconi Wawokiya has been the impetus for social change in the surrounding Indian communities. In 1995, the organization opened its own shelter for victims of domestic violence. Prior to that time, the only form of shelter was office space and two bedrooms. The new facility currently has the capacity to provide shelter for 12 to 14 people, including children. Victims from both the Crow Creek and Lower Brule Reservations seek refuge here. The shelter environment is like a home and provides safety in its location on the reservation so victims do not have to leave their jobs, have their children change schools, or be removed from their extended families when seeking support and

services. Wiconi Wawokiya has developed a complex of buildings that provide services for adults and children, including a storage area for donated clothing and household items that victims may need to start their lives over.

Another building houses The Children’s Safe Place—a child advocacy center. As part of its dedication to improve the lives of Indian families, Wiconi Wawokiya developed one of the first Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) in Indian Country. Knowing that children of abused women may also be victims of physical or sexual abuse, the staff sought support to provide a child-friendly center where Indian children can come for the forensic medical examinations and interviews can be conducted for the investigation of crimes involving the child as a victim or a witness. A forensic medical specialist conducts medical evaluation of suspected child abuse. In addition, tribal and federal investigators come to The Children’s Safe Place to talk with children and their families in a child-centered and culturally specific setting that promotes safety and healing for these victims. Wiconi Wawokiya has telemedicine equipment available to allow the medical examiner to consult with other physicians about forensic medical evidence without taking the child away from the community.

Wiconi Wawokiya advocated for mandatory arrest of domestic violence offenders and was successful when the tribe passed a mandatory arrest law in 1997. Offenders must now be arrested and removed from their homes upon police arrival to provide safety for victims.

The Wiconi Wawokiya staff have received awards and recognition for their hard work and dedication to assisting victims. During the 1998 National Crime Victim Rights Week, Wiconi Wawokiya and Lisa Thompson, the Director, received Certificates of Appreciation from the U.S. Attorney for the District of South Dakota. Another staff member, an advocate, received the award in 2001. Wiconi Wawokiya was also nominated by the U.S. Attorney for the Office for Victims of Crime’s National Crime Victim Rights Week Award.

Community Connections

Volunteers are very instrumental in the success of Wiconi Wawokiya. Currently, the organization has between five and seven active volunteers.

The volunteers perform crucial tasks such as providing transportation to victims, providing comfort to victims by talking with them, cleaning the shelter, sorting through donations, and answering telephone calls. Volunteer trainings are held annually. To express their appreciation for the dedication of the volunteers, the Wiconi Wawokiya staff holds an annual volunteer recognition event to acknowledge and thank the volunteers and recognize their contributions.

Wiconi Wawokiya works tirelessly to educate the community about violence and victims. In 2001, the staff hosted their first annual powwow, entitled “In Honor of Victims and Survivors,” which brought the community together to honor and respect victims and survivors. Wiconi Wawokiya honored victims and survivors with a giveaway. Hosting this annual event is a great opportunity for the community to come together to celebrate and honor survivors as well as learn about stopping the cycle of violence. Wiconi Wawokiya also coordinates other events throughout the year to raise awareness of the issues of child abuse and domestic violence, including production of a quarterly newsletter with resources, stories, and topics to support healing for victims.

From the smallest child victim to the small act of helping a victim dial the phone to talk to law enforcement, no victim or victim’s need is too small for the staff and volunteers at Wiconi Wawokiya. By striving to eradicate violence from homes, workplaces, and schools, they are creating a safer community and Nation. One victim and

family at a time, they break the cycle of violence and help victims realize they are irreplaceable.

Keys to Success

- ◆ Build aggressive coalitions. Multidisciplinary teams, including federal, tribal, and state officials, are crucial when trying to protect victimized children. It is vital to coordinate resources and work together to address child and adult victimization.
- ◆ Understand that the family members of victims of crime need services, too. The children of battered women may or may not have been physically attacked themselves, but they still need services.
- ◆ Build on community strengths. Activities such as powwows and other local events allow the community to honor and appreciate the work done by victim services staff.

Quotes

Our multidisciplinary team includes the federal prosecutor and an FBI agent. We also have our state social services that attend, our BIA social workers, and an advocate as well as myself and our local law enforcement, including our criminal investigator and our Chief of Police.

—Lisa Thompson
Executive Director
Wiconi Wawokiya, Inc.

We’re in a place where we can provide services to both native and non-native children.

—Lisa Thompson
Executive Director
Wiconi Wawokiya, Inc.