



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2008 HONOREE

**Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility and Tohono O'odham Hospice  
Tohono O'odham Nursing Care Authority  
Tohono O'odham Nation**

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*For decades Tohono O'odham elders in need of skilled nursing had to move far away from family and friends to receive care, or stay home and forgo long term care services. However, with the opening of the Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, O'odham elders can now remain in the community. Combining today's latest technologies and world-class clinical care with traditional values, the nursing home has become one of the finest elder care facilities anywhere in the United States.*

#### **Elders Far From Home**

With more than 28,000 enrolled citizens, the Tohono O'odham Nation is located in southern Arizona on a remote desert reservation spanning over 2.8 million acres. Like many Native nations in rural areas around the country, Tohono O'odham experiences high rates of out-migration, as tribal members search for opportunities that are not easily found on the reservation. Until recently, those leaving Tohono O'odham territory included the Nation's elders.

Many elders in failing health required nursing care, but had no place to turn to on tribal lands. For acute problems, citizens could visit doctors at the reservation's Indian Health Service hospital, but when post-hospital or long-term services were needed, patients were transferred to facilities far from the reservation. As a result, elders were separated from family and friends who could not easily visit. One tribal official notes, "It is not hard to conclude that placing an ill and frail O'odham elder in a foreign and often times isolated facility hastens both further debilitation and death." Some elders chose, instead, to stay at home, trying to get by without the medical services they needed. For the terminally ill, this meant going without care that could ease their suffering, such as painkillers for cancer.

At the same time, the number of O'odham elders in need of nursing services has steadily risen. A recent health survey found that the community had alarming health conditions that predicted increased rates for skilled nursing care: 61.9% of O'odham elders had diabetes, 47% were obese, and 58% had limitations on their activity. Because of the tremendous respect for elders in O'odham culture, addressing their needs became a top priority.

#### **O'odham Nursing Care**

As revenues grew in the 1990s, leaders realized that the Nation could finally provide the care its elders deserved and formed the Tohono O'odham Nursing Care Authority. Created under

a legislative charter, the Authority is a tribal enterprise that is founded on O'odham values and sets clear goals. It is overseen by a seven-member board of directors, all of whom are Tohono O'odham citizens. By using the Authority to manage its nursing care, the Nation has a strong focal point for research, management, and coordination. The Authority is also deliberately insulated from tribal politics so that the best program decisions can be made. In addition, tribal support for the Authority is set in four-year budget cycles to avoid uncertainty created from year-to-year funding.

Under the guidance of the Nursing Care Authority, in 2002 the Tohono O'odham Nation opened the Archie Hendricks, Sr. Skilled Nursing Facility, a \$15 million dollar, state-of-the-art nursing home. The facility has 60 beds and, in its first three years, served more than 250 elders. The Nation provides two-thirds of the operational costs and the rest of budget is generated from Medicare and other third-party reimbursements. No citizen is turned away based on an inability to pay.

The Archie Hendricks facility has dramatically changed the way O'odham elders receive care. Community ties are at the core of a patient's stay. The geographic location of the nursing home, combined with a policy of encouraging relatives to visit, keeps patients connected with family and friends. In fact, when management investigated the unusually large amount of toilet paper usage, they discovered that it was a sign of their success—the residents have more guests than is the norm at most long-term care facilities, and they visit for longer. Unlike the typical policies of other nursing homes, the housekeepers, dietary employees, and other non-nursing staff are also encouraged to have as much contact as possible with patients and to live in housing integrated into the nursing home site.

In 2007, Tohono O'odham expanded the Archie Hendricks Facility services to provide another important service to elders that had not previously been available on the reservation. The Tohono O'odham Hospice brings together a team of traditional healers, doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and volunteers to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of dying elders and their families. The Hospice program helps make sure that elders are treated according to O'odham beliefs about the end of life. An employee notes, "For us, the passing of a life is to be accompanied by recognition and by the direct attending and presence of family and community." Elders receive hospice services either in their own homes or at the nursing facility.

The Archie Hendricks facility and the Hospice follow the O'odham Himdag, or way of life, in all aspects of their care. Elders are served culturally significant O'odham foods such as beans and squash. One staff member is solely dedicated to overseeing cultural services at the nursing home, which includes encouraging community involvement and inter-generational activities. Elders are helped with basket making, translation, arranging medicine man visits, and integrating tribal remedies with western medicine. As an example of the richness of community bonds at the facility, the Nation's youth group has held all night traditional singing and dancing ceremonies on the grounds, allowing elders to easily participate and share their wisdom.

### **Excellence in the Community**

The Archie Hendricks facility has become a major employer in the area, creating good jobs for community members. Many staff members, previously employed by the Indian Health Service, now work directly for the Nation. Because the facility is funded on a four-year cycle, it offers stable employment. And, with the exception of the certified and licensed nurses, the 130 member staff is almost 100% O'odham. The dedicated housing for employees also helps attract skilled professionals. Community members can get training for jobs at the facility by

enrolling in a nursing program at the Tohono O’odham Community College.

While deeply rooted in the community, O’odham nursing care also meets the highest clinical standards. From the beginning of the Archie Hendricks project, the Nation decided that “the quality of care must be at or exceed the surrounding standard of care.” Third-party inspections have found that the facility is “virtually flawless.” The facility performs better than other nursing homes in the state as measured by number of falls, the use of physical restraints, and the percentage of patients on multiple medications or antipsychotic drugs.

When Tohono O’odham elders are kept close to home and offered excellent care, families are strengthened. Nations suffer when the older generation is forced to leave the community, interrupting the transfer of knowledge and practices, and straining the bonds of family and friends. The situation that O’odham elders faced before the construction of the Archie Hendricks facility is depressingly familiar across Indian Country. Most Native nations have limited local nursing home options, and no end-of-life services that reflect their cultural values. The lack of reservation-based facilities has become even more problematic as the baby boomer population ages and an increasing number of tribal members become elders. The O’odham nursing facility has been so popular that it is always 98% to 100% full.

### **Bringing the Lessons Home**

With its elders in nursing homes off the reservation, the Tohono O’odham Nation had no control over the care delivered to its own people. Today, O’odham elders who are ill, injured, or disabled are no longer forced to leave home or go without medical care. They can receive care or live out their final days surrounded by family, friends, and familiar traditions. With an emphasis on professionalism, high standards, customized care, and a no-compromise attitude toward the fulfillment of its mission, Tohono O’odham offers its elders nursing services that are both of the highest quality and culturally relevant. The importance of caring for O’odham elders in the community where they belong is summed up with wisdom by one of the program’s guiding principles: “All people deserve to live and die in dignity. Life, death, and dignity are uniquely defined by one’s own culture.”

### **Lessons in Nation Building:**

- Support of tribal leaders and insulation from day-to-day politics leads to effective service provision.
- Tribal nations exercise their power of self-governance when they manage their own programs effectively.
- Providing health care services to a nation's elders nourishes the health and vibrancy of the entire community.

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