

NEWSRELEASE

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Correctional Facilities Bring Indian Culture to Youths

(HELENA) – In an effort to bring their culture closer to young American Indian offenders, the Youth Services Division of the Montana Department of Corrections recently hosted two Native American Wellness Days at Riverside Youth Correctional Facility in Boulder and Pine Hills Youth Correctional Facility in Miles City. Division Administrator Steve Gibson said these are the first of what will be quarterly events at each of the secure facilities, and for paroled youth at transition centers in Great Falls.

Tribal elders, council members, dancers, drummers, mentors and flute player shared their culture, wisdom, traditions, teachings and experiences with the youth at the two facilities.

Cindy McKenzie, superintendent at Riverside, said the opportunity to introduce Indian offenders to aspects of their culture – many for the first time – can play an important role in their rehabilitation by exposing them to good role models.

“Some girls have not had much contact with their cultural roots,” she said. “Others have more, but this event helps all realize they are cared about, thought about and not forgotten by their people. It helps them tap back into some traditions that they learned from an early age that can provide a sense of belonging, connection and motivation. It gives them access to aspects of their culture that they can be proud of.”

Giving the girls a chance to establish contacts with tribal members while incarcerated also improves the chances of them finding support when they return home after being released, McKenzie added.

Jim Hunter, superintendent at Pine Hills, said the event was a great experience for all Indian youth at Pine Hills. Not only did the youth get in touch with their heritage, culture and spirituality, they also realized the support for their well being is present at the facility and most importantly in their home communities.

All 20 girls at Riverside and 23 boys at Pine Hills participated in the activities during October. About half of the girls at Riverside and 29 percent of the boys at Pine Hills are Indians. Youth had the chance to participate in Indian religious ceremonies and other traditions, such as healing circles, smudging, sweats, round dances, eating fry bread, and listening to native languages and songs.

Gibson said the division will continue to offer culturally appropriate programs to all the youth it serves.

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