



U.S. Department  
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**National Highway  
Traffic Safety  
Administration**



# Traffic Tech

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER SERIES

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## How-To Guide for Increasing Seat Belt Use in Indian Country

### Background

Historically, seat belt use has differed dramatically between Tribal and non-Tribal communities. This project sought to develop a guide to address the unique challenges Tribes face regarding seat belt usage. The resulting guide, *Bridging Cultures to Buckle Up: A Guide for Working with Tribes to Increase Seat Belt Use*, provides keys to successful partnerships between State and local officials and Tribes. The intended audience for the guide is State and local officials who are interested in partnering with Tribes in their areas to improve traffic safety through occupant protection, specifically seat belt use. The development of the guide was made possible through a collaborative effort of representatives from Indian Country across the United States, including Tribes, nations, bands, villages, pueblos, and rancherias. State and Federal transportation safety officials and Tribal liaisons were also included as collaborators. Through intentionally incorporating collaborators' perspectives, the guide responds to the needs of its intended audience: State and local officials as well as the Tribes they look to serve.

### Approach

There are nearly 600 federally recognized Tribes in the United States, all with unique customs, traditions, and practices of governing. A core principle of this project was the recognition that each Tribe has its own culture and traditions, as well as specific strengths and needs.

When developing the guide, the project team worked to maximize input from a range of Tribal representatives and other professionals knowledgeable about Tribal traffic safety, increasing seat belt use on Tribal lands, and coordinating and collaborating with State and local officials. A Tribal Advisory Council provided high-level input and direction, and working groups held discussions that informed the content and topics included in the guide.

#### *Tribal Advisory Council*

The team collected in-depth feedback from a Tribal Advisory Council whose members had vast knowledge, skills, and experience in Tribal traffic safety. The Tribal Advisory Council convened three times throughout the development of the guide. Council members shared considerations in selecting regions to include in working groups, important topics to discuss in the working group meetings, and overall direction for the guide development. One of their meetings involved an in-person, day-long meeting designed to elicit thorough and critical feedback on the initial guide draft.

#### *Working Groups*

Two regional working groups included participants from NHTSA Regions 6 and 10, law enforcement (Tribal, city/county, State, and Bureau of Indian Affairs), Tribal officials and representatives, State transportation and safety officials, public health officials, and others. Over the course of a year, the working groups met virtually nine times to discuss content for the occupant protection guide.

Working group meetings covered topics including:

- Environmental and systemic factors that limit the ability of Tribes to increase seat belt use;
- Opportunities to increase mutual understanding and partnership-building;
- NHTSA seat belt strategies and countermeasures and how they might be applicable within State/Tribal dynamics; and
- Model approaches and challenges encountered in programs that have incorporated Indigenous Knowledge and practices.

### *Iterative Guide Drafts*

Using the outline and key points recommended by the working groups, the project team developed the first draft of the guide and allowed time for the working groups and Tribal Advisory Council to give substantive feedback. Members provided perspectives on accurate representation, identified points that were lacking, and contributed additional content. Over several revisions of the guide, subject matter experts provided input and suggestions, detailed comments, additional content, and precise editing of sections that required sensitive or specific verbiage.

## **Outline of the Guide**

Using feedback from working group meetings, the project team organized the key themes into categories that became the chapters of the guide.

1. **Introduction to the Guide** – An overview of the guide’s intended audience and how to use and understand its contents.
2. **Fundamentals** – Discusses Tribal sovereignty, gives historical context of Tribes in the United States, and offers suggestions for knowledge sharing and partnership.
3. **Meaningful Engagement** – Shares ideas for building cultural competence and awareness by asking questions and listening.
4. **How to Get Started** – Outlines suggestions for building relationships with Tribal leaders and other members of the Tribe.
5. **Data** – Highlights how a Tribe’s sovereignty and history might influence their perspective on data collection, use, and sharing.
6. **Funding** – Provides ideas for framing funding opportunities to increase Tribes’ ability to partner and respond.
7. **Conclusion** – Covers key takeaways.

The guide also includes a **Glossary** and **Resource** section that provides additional reading to expand or broaden understanding of the topics.

## **Key Findings**

The following sections summarize the key findings from the Tribal Advisory Council and working group discussions and how those findings informed the content of the guide.

### *Introduction and Fundamentals*

Beyond introducing the purpose of the guide, the Tribal Advisory Council and working groups emphasized that a certain level of understanding is necessary before engaging Tribes. It is critical to acknowledge that each Tribe is unique, and information learned from one Tribal member generally pertains only to their Tribe. Recognizing Tribal sovereignty and the importance of Indigenous Knowledge is foundational to working with Tribes.

### *Meaningful Engagement*

Tribal Advisory Council and working group members often described the type of engagement from State and local officials that facilitates successful (or unsuccessful) working relationships. Notably, sustained engagement was important for building successful relationships. When engaging with Tribes, it is essential to recognize the effect that past government relationships have on future relationships.

### *How to Get Started on Working With Tribes*

Members of the Tribal Advisory Council and working groups repeatedly emphasized the need to explain in the guide how to get started working with Tribes. Trust and relationship building takes effort, personal reflection, asking questions, and listening to responses. Patience and persistence are key to building lasting relationships.

#### *Data*

Data and funding were two points of friction that frequently came up when the Tribal Advisory Council and working groups discussed the working relationship between State officials and Tribes. Both groups emphasized the challenge of data sharing and felt that it was important to outline the sources of difficulty and how State and local officials might overcome them. Reducing the administrative burden on Tribes and ensuring that they benefit from data agreements will improve partnerships going forward.

#### *Funding*

Discussions from the Tribal Advisory Council and working groups provided suggestions for ways to make funding more accessible to Tribes. Tribal governments work differently when it comes to applying for, receiving, and spending funding. Where possible, funding should be offered to Tribes in a way that respects their sovereignty.

## **Successes and Challenges**

There were several key factors that led to the successful development of the guide:

- **Tribal involvement.** The project involved much input and collaboration from Tribal representatives. The guide is a reflection of the leadership, vision, and expertise of the Tribal Advisory Council and working group members.
- **Importance of the topic.** The majority of participants on the Tribal Advisory Council and in the working groups agreed that this guide will be useful to increase occupant protection in Tribal communities.
- **Consistent working group participation.** The team successfully maintained consistent membership in the working groups. Participation stipends and the virtual format were possible factors that contributed to group members' consistent involvement.
- **Iterative approach to guide development.** The team analyzed working group notes to identify common themes and shared the observations with project participants. This allowed for thorough follow up discussions with the working groups and Tribal Advisory Council on subjects of importance. Similarly, the subject matter experts provided feedback on many iterations of the guide. This process helped to determine not just *what* but *how* information should be presented.
- **Subject matter experts.** The subject matter experts all have extensive experience working with Tribes on traffic safety issues and are considered trusted partners among the Tribal traffic safety community. Their familiarity with issues raised by project participants greatly contributed to the project's success.

To successfully complete the guide, the team had to navigate several challenges:

- **Understanding that the guide is not all-encompassing.** Each Tribe has its own unique culture and traditions, as well as specific strengths and needs. To provide State and local officials with maximum knowledge, the guide uses a question-focused format to encourage readers to learn more, and provides an extensive resource list for officials to learn more about Tribes in their area.
- **Covering sensitive topics.** The guide addresses many nuanced issues that can lead to misunderstandings and affect occupant protection. The guide went through multiple iterations and reviews from different representatives to find the right balance.
- **Collecting examples and stories.** There have been some strong successes and partnerships developed in Tribal communities to improve traffic safety and increase seat belt use. However, the stories and successes of traffic safety work in these areas are not widely shared in academic literature or online. Many of the stories in the guide that provide insight into tailoring seat belt campaigns to a Tribal community are not from publicly available sources but rather from the personal experiences of working

group and Tribal Advisory Council members. These stories are important resources for others working in the field of traffic safety.

- **Ensuring the guide is used.** Several members of the Tribal Advisory Council were concerned that the guide would not be shared broadly, in which case their efforts, expertise, and time would be wasted (i.e., the project would be like previous government initiatives that had not resulted in meaningful change to their communities). As a result, the project team worked to develop an outreach plan for the guide and sought additional input from Tribal Advisory Council and working group members on additional communication channels where the guide should be shared.

## Conclusion

This guide aims to prepare State and local officials to be thoughtful collaborators with Tribes in their area. Understanding that Tribes face unique challenges, the project team sought to better define these challenges, highlight their influence on potential collaborations with State and local officials, and offer a new framework for these officials to consider to respectfully engage, support, and collaborate with Tribes. Tribal representatives involved in this project repeatedly emphasized that it was important for State and local officials to take the time to learn more about a Tribe's culture, history, and approach to traffic safety before implementing any traffic safety program. Together, States, localities, and Tribes can bridge cultures and save lives through buckling up.

## How to Order

The guide, *Bridging Cultures to Buckle Up: A Guide for Working With Tribes to Increase Seat Belt Use* (Report No. DOT HS 813 805), can be downloaded at (<https://doi.org/10.21949/efnc-ed47>). Leah Scully was the task order manager for this project.

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