

Governor proposes \$15 million for Yurok wellness center

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A Long-planned Regional Wellness Center in the Yurok community may soon become a reality. Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed an investment of \$15 million to create a much-needed, tribally operated Regional Wellness Center.

The state-of-the-art Regional Wellness Center will offer culturally relevant and conventional drug, alcohol and mental health services. With an option to stay for up to a year, based court referrals, residents will have access to a wide variety of supportive services, which revolve around the restoration of mental, physical and spiritual health.

Services will include: methamphetamine treatment, medically assisted treatment for opioid addiction, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, meditation and guided breathing and relaxation techniques. The Center will provide on-campus and off-campus cultural activities and events to keep residents connected to their community. Individual, family and group therapy will be also be available.

There are no similar facilities in the region, which extends from Southern Oregon to Southern Humboldt County. Currently, the Yurok Tribal Court sends a majority of its clients to San Francisco for drug treatment, which is hundreds of miles away from their families and support groups. The long distance also prevents them from participating in the Tribe's culture and place-based religion.

The Tribe's traditional value system focuses on maintaining balance on an individual and global scale. The Tribal Court's Wellness Court and Joint Family Wellness Court have helped numerous Tribal citizens achieve sobriety and return to being contributing members of the community. The Regional Wellness Center will enable the Court to exponentially increase the number of people it can serve.

"In addition to putting their lives at risk and causing tremendous heartache within their families, those in the throes of addiction are vulnerable to human trafficking and worse," said Tribal Chief Justice Abby Abinanti. "Human traffickers know they can easily take advantage of addicts' dependence on drugs and manipulate them in horrible ways. I know of many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women People cases that involve victims who were struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues," Justice Abinanti said.

"These new facilities will aid in our efforts to combat the MMIWP crisis too," Justice Abinanti added. "I hope and pray this dream finally comes true."

On the West Coast, the opioid epidemic first took root in the remote Northern California region. In Humboldt County, the rate of overdose deaths is more than twice the national average, and overdose mortality rates have jumped 40 percent in the last two years. In 2018, the Yurok Tribe filed a federal lawsuit against 20 of the largest opioid manufacturers and distributors in the United States in an attempt to hold them accountable for their role in the widespread abuse of prescription painkillers.

Located in the northwestern corner of California, the Yurok Tribe is the largest federally recognized Tribe in California, and neighbors the second and third most populous sovereign tribal nations.

Due to historical trauma, poverty and systemic inequities as well as many other complex factors, mental health issues, including substance abuse, are disproportionately prevalent in this rural part of the state.

Based on the success of the Yurok Tribal Court's Wellness Court and Joint Family Wellness Court, the Regional Wellness Center will significantly reduce rates of addiction and elevate the communities of California's north coast.

Yurok Tribal Chairman Joseph L. James said the Yurok Nation has been working on this project for a really long time.

"It will strengthen our shared communities from many generations to come. It's that important. The Regional Wellness Center will serve as the most powerful tool in our arsenal to combat the disease of addiction," James said.

Matt Mais is the Public Relations Director for the Yurok Tribe

