

Chickasaw Nation Sick Child Care Program

Chickasaw Nation

Working parents face a dilemma when a child falls ill. Staying home to provide care or finding a relative or friend to help can be a major challenge, especially for single parents, two-worker families, and employees whose jobs offer limited flexibility. The Chickasaw Nation Sick Child Care Program offers a safe and nurturing place for mildly ill children to spend the day and gives working parents the assurance that their children are receiving proper care.

FORCED TO TAKE TIME OFF WORK

The Chickasaw Nation is one of the largest tribes in Oklahoma, with 60% of its nearly 60,000 citizens living in the state. In the past twenty years, the Nation has experienced rapid economic growth and significant expansion of its government operations. Today, the Nation employs 13,000 people in government departments and tribal enterprises.

The smooth functioning of Chickasaw government and business operations depends on the effectiveness of this sizeable workforce. By the mid-2000s, however, employee absenteeism began to take a toll. Managers with absent staff were forced to reorder priorities or leave work undone, reducing productivity and making it more difficult to sustain the Nation's many programs, services, and business activities. A 2007 study by the Nation's Economic Development Department found that in many cases, employees took days off work not because they were sick themselves but because they needed to care for others. These caregiver days represented more than half of the sick days employees had submitted the prior year.

The evidence also suggested that economic and social factors were key drivers of caregiving-related absences. In the Chickasaw Nation, as elsewhere in the United States, many children live in single-parent families or in families with two working parents, and no adult is regularly available to be with children at home. Families are smaller in size, and adults remain in the workforce longer, so traditional extended family is caregiving also less common. If parents cannot find people they trust to look after their sick children, taking time off work is the only option.

Importantly, caregiving-related absenteeism isn't simply an employer issue – it has negative consequences for Chickasaw citizens as well. For parents who earn hourly wages or do not have paid sick leave, each missed day represents lost family income. Employees who are more frequently absent may have fewer opportunities for career advancement or may be ineligible for certain positions. Some parents worry that taking a day off sends the message that they are not serious about their work. And yet, the problem is inevitable: the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that elementary school-age children suffer from colds or the flu between eight and twelve times a year.

A SAFE PLACE FOR MILDLY ILL CHILDREN

In 2009, the Chickasaw Nation Economic Development Department, working in cooperation with the Chickasaw Child Development Center, proposed a novel approach to meeting the needs of working parents and their children – the Chickasaw Sick Child Care Program. The program, a non-profit service of the Chickasaw Nation, provides quality care for mildly ill children ages 3 months to 12 years.

The Sick Child Care Program is housed in its own building near the Chickasaw Nation Child Development Center and Chickasaw Nation government headquarters in Ada, Oklahoma. The facility can accommodate 35 children per day in six rooms equipped with separate ventilation systems. While the Sick Child Care Program primarily serves Chickasaw Nation employees, it is open to all local residents – Chickasaw and non-Chickasaw alike – regardless of their place of employment. Program services are free to Chickasaw Nation employees, discounted for tribal citizens, and available for a nominal fee (\$6/day in 2016) to non-Chickasaw users.

When a child arrives at the center, a Registered Nurse conducts an initial assessment to rule out severe or highly contagious illness. If there are questions about a child's suitability for the program, the nurse consults with an on-call physician. Children with mild illnesses are admitted and assigned to an age- and diagnosis-appropriate room. Staff members develop a care plan that takes account of the child's age, symptoms, and activity level. If a child is well enough, these activities include Chickasaw-based educational materials, toys, and games. Each child's health is monitored throughout the day, and under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chickasaw Medical Center and the Sovereign Medical Clinic, Sick Child Care staff nurses administer medical tests and dispense medication to children as needed. Center staff also update parents by text or email and, at pick-up, make a recommendation concerning the child's return to daycare or school. At the end of a child's stay, the care room is disinfected to the same sanitization standard as a hospital room.

Today, Chickasaw Nation employees and area families are active users of the Sick Child Care Program's services and have great confidence in the care their children receive. In 2015, parents using the facility avoided 1,097 absences from work, days that bolstered their family incomes and improved their chances of career success. As the program's founders had hoped, the Chickasaw Nation also was a major beneficiary of these reclaimed work days: its employees accounted for 890 of the avoided absences for caregiving. The program has proven so popular that the Nation is planning to open a second facility in conjunction with a new child care center in Ardmore, Oklahoma; with this new development, even more parents will be able to access sick child care services.

CULTURAL CAREGIVING

The Chickasaw Sick Child Care Program is the only service of its kind in the state of Oklahoma and the first in Indian Country. The program is well integrated into the area's child care and medical infrastructure. It coordinates with Head Start to offer parent education classes on health

and wellness topics such as nutritious foods and medication dosage guidelines. While formed to address the needs of Chickasaw Nation citizens and employees, the program is available to all area children, making life easier for working families and employers across the region. In fact, in any given year, approximately 20% of the children cared for at the center are non-Native. In sum, both the existence and design of the program reflect the tribe's leadership in governance innovation. The Chickasaw Nation identified a problem in the community and developed a successful response that serves its citizens and its neighbors.

An important aspect of this innovation is the program's "Chickasawness": the Sick Child Care Program is a manifestation of core tribal values adapted to the realities of modern life. For example, generosity is a guiding principle in Chickasaw culture. By creating a facility and bringing together qualified staff to make sure sick children have access to the best care possible, the nation's citizens share with one other, the Nation's government and businesses share with their employees, and the tribe shares with the broader community. Caring for family, and especially for youth, is another important responsibility for all Chickasaw citizens. The center ensures that children receive the advantages of intergenerational caregiving when their own family members are unable to provide it. "Many of the caregivers are the elderly," observed one working mother who has used the Sick Child Care Program. "They are so caring and loving. They treat the children like they are their grandchildren." The program supports parents by helping them protect their families; in turn, these parent-employees are able to help create a better quality of life for all.

Cultural connections also are evident in the center's activities and curriculum. The program incorporates Chickasaw cultural activities and healing techniques in all aspects of its care. Infants and very young children are soothed with Chickasaw hymns and storytelling. Older children benefit from language lessons and exposure to culturally relevant movies, songs, and games. Parents report that their children have such positive experiences and love the center so much that many ask if they can attend even when they are not ill. One father noted that when his son needed to attend the center for many days while recuperating from surgery, the fact that he could practice his Chickasaw made the recovery time well spent. Significantly, these cultural connections are advantages of a tribally controlled program: the Chickasaw Nation, not outside authorities, determine these key aspects of program operation and design.

BRINGING THE LESSONS HOME

A modern economic reality is that sick children often equate with missed work days for parents. With its Sick Child Care Program, the Chickasaw Nation makes it possible for parents to take care of family members while maintaining their economic productivity, and for mildly ill children to get proper medical supervision and enriching cultural experiences when they cannot be in school.

Lessons:

1. When tribal governments empower their employees and citizens to identify and address solutions to community challenges, they lay the groundwork for successful tribal programs.

2. Tribal programs that serve both Native and non-Native community members build goodwill.
3. Personnel policies that provide for useful and ongoing training result in excellent customer service, community-focused programs, and above-par employee retention.