

Tribal designated crisis responder

Background

Tribal communities are the experts in caring for their own people, and Tribal Designated Crisis Responders (Tribal DCRs)—appointed by the authority in consultation with Tribes—are a vital part of that care, using their training to respond to serious behavioral health crises and evaluate whether individuals need urgent help under Washington’s Involuntary Treatment Act (ITA) RCW 71.05 for adults and RCW 71.34 for youth ages 13 and older.

As sovereign nations, Tribes have inherent authority to manage crises within their communities and for Tribal members. In 2020, Tribal DCRs were incorporated into Washington State law, creating a pathway to provide ITA investigation through statewide jurisdiction, ensuring they could serve Tribal and non-Tribal individuals at the discretion of the Tribe. Tribal DCRs are to be recognized in all Washington State Superior courts as having the authority to submit involuntary commitment petitions. Tribal DCRs operate under key legal frameworks including but not limited to RCWs 71.05, 71.24, 71.34, and WAC 182-125-0100.

Tribal DCRs are part of the **Washington Indian Behavioral Health Act**, which supports Tribes in leading behavioral health crisis services for their communities. Because they are rooted in the community, Tribal DCRs provide care that is culturally responsive, respectful, and timely. Tribes decide how and when their DCRs serve—whether only within their community or more broadly.

The Health Care Authority works alongside Tribes to ensure the DCR process respects and upholds **Tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and health equity**—recognizing that Tribes have the authority and expertise to guide crisis response efforts to care for their own people.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Tribal DCR?

Tribal DCRs can be appointed by the Tribe, the state, or both. Tribal DCRs have the same duties as county and regional DCRs. Tribal DCRs appointed by HCA under WAC 182-125-0100 operate in State Superior Courts. The intention for this Tribal-specific DCR is to bridge behavioral health care needs of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities to honor cultural needs and Tribal sovereignty when delivering care.

What authority do Tribal DCRs have?

- Petitions initiated by Tribal DCRs are recognized by the Washington State Superior Court and behavioral health service providers.
- Tribal DCRs have statewide jurisdiction, meaning that they can respond to crises on Tribal land and across Washington.
- Tribal DCRs can provide ITA services for any individual in any region of the state, as decided upon by the Tribe.

How does a Tribal DCR differ from a regional or county DCR?

Tribal DCRs must be prepared to navigate government-to-government matters, collaborate with Indian health care providers (IHCP), and respond to Tribal law enforcement. Tribes will determine their services area, operational structure, and individuals they serve. Regional and county DCRs serve the broader public within their county jurisdiction and may not have specialized training in Tribal cultural practices.

Why are Tribal DCRs important?

- Tribal DCRs:

- Offer culturally relevant trauma-informed crisis response services that improve system effectiveness, trust, and community engagement.
- Create a holistic and culturally relevant way of addressing crisis situations and helping community members access healing services across the continuum for behavioral health treatment.
- Address inequities in behavioral health care and serve the community in a culturally appropriate way.
- Provide time-sensitive response and coordination, and have knowledge and experience of Tribal community practices, which increase efficiency of DCR services.

Who reaches out to a Tribal DCR?

Indian Health Care Providers, federally recognized Tribes, health care centers, law enforcement, or other supportive individuals can contact a Tribal DCR. Regional and county DCRs can contact Tribal DCRs to make referrals for individuals within a Tribal DCR's service area and population. Both service area and population served are outlined in the Tribal crisis coordination protocols or within the Tribal DCR notification letter, if protocols are not in place.

ITA investigations

The Tribal DCR will conduct a thorough evaluation and investigation of the individual in crisis. The evaluation determines if symptoms of mental health or substance use disorder are acute and if there are risk concerns. This may include interviewing Tribal entities, family, and friends. Tribal DCRs combine clinical experience with cultural sensitivity to ensure individuals in crisis receive appropriate care within Tribal and state regulations. Tribal DCRs operating in State Superior Court will follow the DCR protocols.

Risk determination

The Tribal DCR assesses if a person meets involuntary detention criteria under ITA. Criteria include determining if the individual's symptoms place them at risk of serious harm and/or grave disability. If the criteria are **not** met, the Tribal DCR may refer the person to voluntary treatment options or connect them with community support services.

Detention process

- If the individual meets ITA criteria, the Tribal DCR will seek placement to detain the person for up to 120 hours (excluding weekends and holidays) at an evaluation and treatment (E&T) facility for mental health disorders or secure withdrawal management and stabilization (SWMS) facility.
- The court may order additional commitment (time), if appropriate. For more information, view the [ITA fact sheet](#).

ITA commitment and collaboration

Tribal DCRs will collaborate with inpatient facilities, state courts, behavioral health – administrative service organizations, DCR agencies, behavioral health agencies, and Tribal health systems to ensure proper care. Tribal DCRs can use recently updated court forms to file in any Superior Court. Tribal DCRs will also connect individuals to ongoing behavioral health support during commitment and after discharge.

When a Tribal DCR places an individual with an E&T or SWMS facility –or the person is identified as an AI/AN individual who receives Tribal services—the facility discharging the individual is responsible for notifying the Tribal DCR office and Tribe (RCW 71.05.435(1)).

Contact

For more information about Tribal DCRs, please contact your [Regional Tribal Liaison](#).