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Vaya Partners Reaffirms Commitment to Tribal Healthcare Communities This Native American Heritage Month

GASTONIA, N.C. (Nov. 13, 2026) – As Vaya Partners begins a new chapter as a merged organization, the Local Management Entity/Managed Care Organization (LME/MCO) joins North Carolina's Tribal communities in celebrating Native American Heritage Month this November and reaffirms its longstanding commitment to Tribal healthcare.

"While our organization grows and evolves, our dedication to the tribal communities we serve remains steadfast," said Vaya Partners Deputy CEO Rachel Porter. "We are proud to move forward together, honoring the partnerships and values that built our foundation while supporting the ongoing strength, sovereignty, and health of Native communities across North Carolina."

Vaya Partners, which is now the largest LME/MCO in North Carolina, formed on Oct. 1, 2026, with the merger of Partners Health Management and Vaya Health. Both organizations had histories of working closely with Tribal communities. Vaya Partners continues to prioritize culturally responsive care, meaningful community partnerships, and whole-person health across the region.

Central to this mission is the work of Vaya Partners' dedicated tribal liaisons: Davan Wildcatt, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), and Shelby Holland, a member of the Lumbee Tribe. Together, Wildcatt and Holland work directly with tribal leaders, healthcare systems, and community members to bridge care gaps and support local initiatives.

How LME/MCOs and the EBCI Tribal Option Work Together
Indigenous communities often face unique health disparities and systemic barriers to accessing specialized care. In North Carolina, LME/MCOs work directly with state and federally recognized tribes to ensure Medicaid beneficiaries and underinsured residents receive specialized behavioral health, intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD), and traumatic brain injury (TBI) services that respect cultural traditions.

A cornerstone of this collaborative model is Vaya Partners' ongoing coordination with the EBCI Tribal Option. Managed by the Cherokee Indian Hospital Authority (CIHA), the EBCI Tribal Option is the first Indian Managed Care Entity in the nation. It manages the primary care needs of federally recognized tribal members and individuals eligible for Indian Health Services (IHS)—primarily across Cherokee, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, and Swain counties, with opt-in availability in neighboring counties (Buncombe, Clay, Henderson, Macon, Madison, and Transylvania).

Through this partnership, healthcare delivery is seamlessly integrated:

- **Primary Care and Cultural Alignment:** The EBCI Tribal Option provides primary physical health care and care management rooted in Cherokee culture and community values.
- **Specialized LME/MCO Coordination:** Vaya Partners works alongside the EBCI Tribal Option and through NC Medicaid Direct and Tailored Plans to coordinate care for members experiencing serious mental illness, severe substance use disorders, I/DD, or TBI.
- **Whole-Person Support:** By pairing local tribal liaisons with specialized care managers, Vaya Partners helps tribal members across its service region navigate complex healthcare systems, access home- and community-based services (such as the NC Innovations Waiver and 1915(i) services), and connect with local resources for housing, food, and transportation.

Honoring Native American Heritage Month

Observed annually in November, Native American Heritage Month is a vital opportunity to celebrate the enduring cultures, traditions, and histories of Indigenous peoples, while elevating awareness of the historical trauma and contemporary health disparities that Native communities continue to navigate. This underscores why culturally grounded, community-led care is essential to long-term wellness.

Throughout the month, Vaya Partners joins communities nationwide in honoring the resilience and contributions of Native Americans, with special recognition for the three federally recognized and nine state-recognized tribes in North Carolina (home to the largest American Indian population in the eastern United States):

- The Catawba Indian Nation (federally recognized)
- The Coharie Tribe
- The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (federally recognized)
- The Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe
- The Lumbee Tribe (federally recognized)
- The Meherrin Indian Nation
- The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation
- The Sappony
- The Waccamaw Siouan Tribe

Upcoming Native American Heritage Month Events and Ways to Participate

Vaya Partners encourages residents across North Carolina to deepen their understanding of Native heritage by participating in upcoming local and national observances throughout November, arranged chronologically below:

- **Museum of the Cherokee People: "Fear as a Teacher" exhibit**, on display through November, with artwork by Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians artists. The museum's "Unrelenting: Cherokee People and the American Revolution" exhibition runs through Dec. 30, 2026.
    - **When:** Now through Nov. 30, 2026 | 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.
      (Open daily, last ticket sold at 4 p.m.)
    - **Where:** Museum of the Cherokee People, T589 Tsali Blvd., Cherokee, NC 28719.
    - **Details:** Artwork by EBCI artists. The museum's "Unrelenting: Cherokee People and the American Revolution" exhibition runs through Dec. 30, 2026.

- **4th Annual Lumbee Cultural Health Fair & Connect and Heal Talking Circle**
  - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.
  - **Where:** The Lumbee Tribe Cultural Center, 824 Terry Sanford Drive, Maxton, N.C. 28364.
  - **Details:** A day focused on community health, wellness resources, and cultural connection.

- **Stories in Motion**
  - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | 11 a.m. – noon
  - **Where:** Union County Library Main Library, Griffin Room, 316 E. Windsor St., Monroe, N.C. 28112.
  - **Details:** The Metrolina Native American Association showcases Native American dances and demonstrations, in partnership with Union County Library.

- **Blowing Rock: Studio Saturday: Cherokee Beadwork-Inspired Paintings**
  - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | 11 a.m. – 1 p.m.
  - **Where:** Blowing Rock Art & History Museum, 159 Ginny Stevens Lane, Blowing Rock, NC 28605.
  - **Details:** Create paintings inspired by Cherokee beadwork.

- **Kananesgi Art Show and Fashion Show**
  - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | **Art Show/Market:** Noon – 4 p.m.
  - **Fashion Show:** 6:30-8:30 p.m.
  - **Where:** Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort, 777 Casino Drive, Cherokee, N.C.
  - **Details:** Art Show/Art Market, noon-4 p.m. in the Event Center Lobby, free. Fashion Show: VIP reception at 5 p.m., doors open at 6 p.m., show from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., tickets required. This is the 8th annual show, with original collections from Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians designers plus guest Indigenous designers. Tickets are $25 for general admission; $115 for VIP. Available here.

- **“Rock Your Mocs” Day (National Social Media Campaign)**
  - **When:** Sunday, Nov. 15, 2026 | All Day
  - **Where:** Virtual.
  - **Details:** Hosted by U.S. Indian Affairs, participants are encouraged to wear moccasins or traditional regalia and share photos on Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn using the hashtag **#RockYourMocs** and tagging **@USIndianAffairs**.

- **Western Carolina University Cherokee Center “Rock Your Mocs” Day Event**
  - **When:** Sunday, Nov. 15, 2026 | 1 p.m. – 4 p.m.
  - **Where:** Western Carolina University Cherokee Center, A.K. Hinds University Center Grand Room, 245 Memorial Dr, Cullowhee, NC 28723.
  - **Details:** Free. A social hour starts at 1 p.m. with cultural programming from 2 to 4 p.m., including Raven Rock Dancers, storytelling, NAIWA Singers, and a Cherokee language presentation.

- **Cherokee Beadwork Inspired Paintings**
  - **When:** Monday, Nov. 16, 2026 | Noon – 2 p.m.
  - **Where:** Western Watauga Community Center, 1081 Old US Highway 421, Cove Creek, NC 28679.
    Details: Free art class, registration not required, materials provided. Presented by Blowing Rock Art & History Museum and the Watauga County Project on Aging.

- **NC Tribes Crossword Puzzle**
  - **When:** Saturday-Monday, Nov. 14-16, 2026 | All Day
  - **Where:** Graham Public Library, 211 S. Main St., Graham, NC 27253.
  - **Details:** For adults: complete the crossword about North Carolina tribes for a chance to win a raffle prize.

- **Native American Heritage Take and Makes**
  - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 16, 2026 | Varies by Event
  - **Where:** Mebane Public Library, 101 S. 1st St, Mebane, NC 27302.
  - **Details:** Book Buddies, 4:30 p.m. the same day, for grades K-2, with the theme Native American Heritage Month. Mebane also has a Native American Heritage Month Scavenger Hunt for grades K-6 running in November.

- **Learning about Harm Reduction & Family Game Night (Fayetteville, NC)**
  - **When:** Monday, Nov. 16, 2026 | 6 p.m. – 8 p.m.
  - **Where:** The Fayetteville Beyond Blue Neighborhood Center, 1800 Owen Drive, Fayetteville, NC 28304
  - **Details:** Community evening featuring harm reduction education, dinner, crafts, and family bingo.

- **Community Planting Day at UNC's Botanical Garden (Chapel Hill, NC)**
  - **When:** Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2026 | 9 a.m. – noon
  - **Where:** UNC Botanical Garden, 205 Wilson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516
  - **Details:** Volunteer community planting with food provided; direct RSVP required.

- **31st Annual NC Museum of History American Indian Heritage Celebration**
  - **Virtual Education Day:** Friday, Nov. 20, 2026 | 9 a.m. – 2 p.m. Register online here.
  - **In-Person Festival:** Saturday, Nov. 21, 2026 | 11 a.m. – 4 p.m.
  - **Where:** North Carolina Museum of Art, East Building and Gipson Plaza, 2110 Blue Ridge Road, Raleigh, NC 27607. (Held off-site because the main Museum of History building is temporarily closed for renovations.)
  - **Details:** Free and open to the public, honoring all nine recognized tribes in North Carolina with live performances, cultural demonstrations, and artisan and food vendors.

- **Cabarrus County: Celebrate Native American Heritage Month**
    - **When:** Saturday, Nov. 23, 2026 | 4:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.
    - **Where:** Cabarrus County Public Library, Midland Branch, 4297 NC-24 27 C, Midland, NC 28107.
    - **Details:** Family program exploring the cultures, traditions, stories, and contributions of Indigenous peoples in North Carolina through books, hands-on activities, and interactive learning. No registration.

ABOUT VAYA PARTNERS

Formed through the consolidation of Vaya Health and Partners Health Management, Vaya Partners builds on decades of service to more than 225,000 members in 47 North Carolina counties. As the state's largest specialty managed care organization and local management entity, Vaya Partners oversees publicly funded care for individuals with mental health, substance use disorders, intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD), and traumatic brain injury (TBI) needs. Vaya Partners manages Medicaid, federal, state, and local funding to meet member and community needs while advancing whole-person, integrated physical and behavioral healthcare.

Vaya Partners is a local unit of government and one of three local management entities/managed care organizations (LME/MCOs) in North Carolina's public healthcare system. The North Carolina General Assembly expanded the LME/MCO model statewide in 2011, building on a 50-year legacy of county-area programs rooted in community-based, person-centered care. Together with members, families, providers, and community partners, Vaya Partners is advancing its shared commitment to Improving Lives and Strengthening Communities.