



# THE GRIN



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GILA RIVER INDIAN NEWS || [www.GRICNEWS.org](http://www.GRICNEWS.org)

FEBRUARY 13, 2026

## Big Plays, Big Spirit at GRIC's First NFL FLAG Tournament

*The first all-Indigenous NFL FLAG tournament brought families, former Cardinals players and Community leaders together to celebrate sports, wellness and opportunity*

**Emma Hughes**  
Gila River Indian News

Youth in and around the Gila River Indian Community had the chance to participate in the inaugural all-Indigenous NFL FLAG football tournament on Jan. 31 at the Sacaton Fairgrounds. The event was hosted by the Tribal Recreation and Wellness Department in partnership with Arizona Cardinals Youth Football Development and Gila River Resorts & Casinos.

"Today is our big end-of-season tournament, and in partnership with the Cardinals, we've been running our NFL FLAG league for five weeks now. We're ending our season with this great event and partnership with the Cardinals," said Sonja Luevano, recreation manager for Tribal Recreation and Wellness (TRW).

The tournament featured single-elimination brackets for



From 6U to 15U, young athletes competed for medals and rings in a high-energy event powered by TRWD (Tribal Recreation and Wellness Department) and the Arizona Cardinals. Emma Hughes/GRIN

the 6U, 8U, 10U, 12U and 15U divisions, with players ranging from ages 3 to 15. The winning teams were:

- 6U Champs – Bengals
- 8U Champs – Cardinals

• 10U Champs – Dolphins

• 15U Champs – Cardinals

More than 140 youth competed in the tournament, and ev-

ery participant walked away with either a special collaborative Cardinals medal or a championship ring.

*Continued on Page 8*

## District Meetings Reinforce Community Safety Priorities

*Officials, departments and families discuss coordinated efforts to support youth and strengthen neighborhood across the Community Roundtable meetings.*

**Miguel Sallard**  
Managing Editor

District meetings across the Gila River Indian Community in recent weeks have underscored a unified commitment to strengthening public safety and family well-being. Parents, youth, traditional leaders, the Police Department, the Office of Community Manager and elected officials, including Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis and Lt. Gov. Regina Antone, have participated in structured discussions addressing emerging concerns within local neighborhoods.

Meeting topics have includ-

ed youth exposure to unhealthy behaviors, situations that may place them at risk, and the importance of reinforcing the community curfew. Participants also spoke about creating supportive environments and reducing access to items or situations that may compromise safety. While these topics remain sensitive, the meeting have focused on encouragement, available resources and ongoing interdepartmental coordination.

The Police Department provided updates on preventive patrols, youth engagement initiatives and efforts to reduce activities that negatively affect community safety. The Office of Community Manager reaffirmed its role in supporting departments and districts with information, coordination and access to programs that promote healthy and positive environments.

Community leaders emphasized that safety begins at home and grows through communication between families and local departments. Many parents in attendance expressed concern about the pressures young people face today. In response, the community has offered workshops, educational materials and opportunities for families to connect and talk openly.

"We want our youth to grow with pride, with confidence, with opportunity and the support of the entire community," has been a recurring message throughout the meetings. The goal is not to criticize, but to guide, uplift and remind families that they play an essential role in the well-being of the Community.

Suggestions shared with parents included:

- Staying informed about their children's social circles and

daily activities.

- Talking openly about influences or situations that may not be healthy or safe.
- Establishing clear routines and supporting the community curfew.
- Participating in school, sports and cultural programs.
- Reaching out for support when needed, the Community offers resources to help.

These District meetings show that when the Community comes together with honesty, care and respect, meaningful solutions emerge. The challenges are real, but so is the commitment to face them together. In Gila River Indian Community, safety is not only a goal, but also a shared promise strengthened every time a family, parents, a young person or a leader chooses to participate.

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21 | 8PM



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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22 | 8PM

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**INDIGENOUS**  
Journalists Association

# From Gila River to the Super Bowl LX

## PRESS RELEASE: B&GCA/G R I C

SACATON, Ariz. — When Sinai talks about leadership, she doesn't raise her voice. She doesn't need to. The 16 year old member of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Gila River Indian Community has learned that real influence comes from consistency — from showing up, speaking with purpose, and carrying her community's stories with care.

That quiet strength is what will take her all the way to Super Bowl LX in Santa Clara last weekend, where she will stand not just as a football fan, but as one of Boys & Girls Clubs of America's "Champions of Change."

Sinai is one of only three teens nationwide selected for the honor, a recognition born from the Think, Learn, Create Change (TLC) program a BGCA initiative that teaches young people how to advocate for social justice issues that matter to them. Through a partnership with the NFL's Inspire Change initiative, teens who complete the Inspire Change Badge Challenge are encouraged to design real projects that uplift their communities.

This year, Sinai's work stood out. A Project Rooted in Urgency and Love

For Sinai, advocacy is not an abstract idea. It is personal, tied to the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and their relatives, an issue that touches families across Native communities, including her own.

Alongside fellow Club members, she has helped shape a series of projects meant to spark awareness, connection, and healing. Their plans include:

• Launching a youth-led podcast featuring community updates, resources, and conversations with tribal leaders, law



**Sinai A. From District 6 (far right) with other Super Bowl trip winners.** Photo submitted by Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

enforcement, and other young advocates.

- Building an online network where Boys & Girls Clubs on Native Lands can share ideas, collaborate on events, and support one another's advocacy efforts.

- Hosting a community town hall, inviting tribal leaders and possibly members of the Arizona Task Force to join an open, intergenerational conversation about safety, justice, and collective responsibility.

Each idea reflects the same belief: that young people have a role, and a responsibility, in shaping the future of their communities.

"I think what makes a champion is dedication," Sinai said. "No matter what you're doing

whether it's sports or learning a new skill, you keep showing up. In my community, I use my voice to encourage others and share what's going on."

A National Spotlight on Youth Leadership

The NFL sees that same determination.

"The NFL Foundation has a responsibility to use the power of our platform to create opportunity for the next generation," said Anna Isaacson, the league's senior vice president of social responsibility. "Through our long-standing partnership with Boys & Girls Clubs of America, we're empowering young people to be advocates for themselves and their communities."

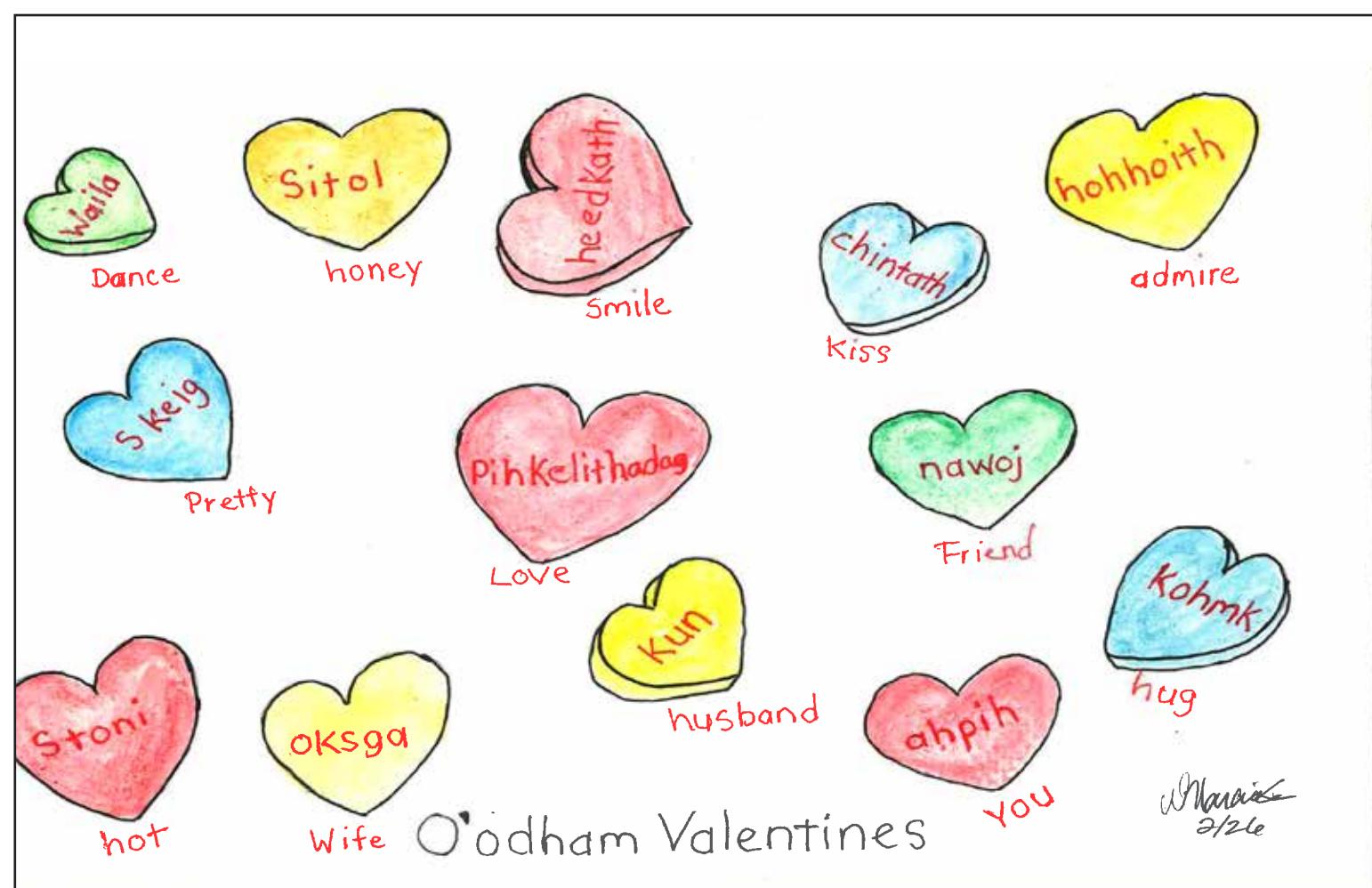
For Sinai, the trip to the Super Bowl, complete with tickets

to the game and access to Super Bowl Experience events, is both a celebration and a reminder. She will represent the Gila River Indian Community on a national stage, standing alongside LJ from West Alabama and Jaelyn from Greater St. Louis.

But she carries something larger than a title.

She carries the stories of her peers. She carries the urgency of a movement. She carries the hope that her generation can help shift the future.

And as she prepares to step into the roar of a stadium thousands of miles from home, Sinai remains grounded in the same belief that started her journey: that change begins with one voice choosing to speak, and another choosing to listen.



# ★ VETERANS ★ ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Veteran Round Table Kicks Off at District 4

### Jeston Morris

Gila River Indian News

The Veterans & Family Services Office (VFSO) hosted a veteran round table at the District 4 Multi-Purpose Center on Jan. 30.

Wesley Rhodes, veteran peer support specialist, delivered the welcome remarks, and former Council Representative Jewel Whiteman offered the invocation. Presenters included Dana Allmond and Teresa Celestine from the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) and Jose Maldonado from the American Legion. Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis provided the closing remarks.



Jose Maldonado giving a presentation on American Legion Department of Arizona. Jeston Morris/GRIN

According to Darrell Whitman, veteran peer support specialist, District 4 kicked off the first round table of 2026. He emphasized the importance of strong communication—especially for GRIC veterans—as the federal government and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continue to implement changes. The round table aims to keep veterans and their families informed with the latest updates while also creating opportunities for networking and camaraderie.

Retired Master Sgt. Palmer Miller, who served 23 years in the U.S. Army, shared his experience. He worked for the State of Arizona in various capacities be-



Darrell Whittman and Kim Skelton holding up a large fabric DD214 form important document for applying for veteran services. Jeston Morris/GRIN

fore joining the Gila River VFSO.

"The mission that I was given was to create an office for the Gila River Veterans & Family Services, get our office staff trained, and receive VA recognition," Miller said. "We did not give up on our mission and goal during COVID." Now fully retired, he occasionally visits the VFSO to reconnect with friends.

Allmond, a West Point graduate and retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, spoke about her career after military service. "I was so honored when Governor Hobbs appointed me to her cabinet," she

said.

She emphasized her commitment to supporting veterans, noting that services such as food and utility assistance, employment support, childcare, child support, and early intervention for school-age children are available through DES.

Celestine, a DES workforce supervisor, presented information on the Veteran Toolkit program. The Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, Arizona@Work and the Arizona Housing Coalition partnered to provide the toolkit. Qualifications include living in Arizona, having served in the U.S. military, and being enrolled with Arizona@Work. Eligible veterans may receive assistance with job-related items such as work clothing, tools, protective equipment, transportation and essential electronic devices. Veterans can visit any participating office to apply.

Maldonado, a building maintenance worker at GRIC District 2, a councilmember for the Town of Florence and a vice commander for the American Legion Department of Arizona, discussed the American Legion's four pillars: veteran affairs and rehabilitation, national security, Americanism, and children and youth. He also addressed alternative medicine, streamlining services within 18–24 months and the issue of veteran suicide.

He highlighted the American Legion's "Be the One" initiative. "I want to be the one who stops a veteran from committing suicide. I had friends who committed suicide, and 22 veteran suicides a day is too many," he said. He stressed the importance of checking in with fellow veterans to ensure they are doing well.

The round table discussion took place toward the end of the event, with approximately a dozen community members participating.

"Suggestions for the Veterans & Family Services Office: We have events, but I don't think they are publicized enough," said David. "I know about the events be-



A group of veterans from Gila River Indian Community attended the event and stood beside Governor Lewis. Jeston Morris/GRIN

opened my eyes to how fortunate we are.

I learned things I did not know before."

Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis began his remarks by thanking presenters Allmond, Celestine and Maldonado. He also acknowledged the work on the Purple Heart designation project.

"It's important for our guests to learn about the Gila River Purple Heart veterans. It speaks volumes to the history and contributions of our veterans," he said.

"We are looking forward to a whole new year—2026. The Iwo Jima Landing and Flag Raising is in mid-February," Gov. Lewis said. "Based on the round table discussion, if we need to, we can put more resources—such as staffing or communication—into our Veterans & Family

Services Office."

"These round tables are crucial to getting the latest information regarding benefits and services. Having the veteran organizations come out and share information is great. We had an excellent Q&A at the end. We get feedback on how we can improve services. We always look forward to the quarterly round table," he added.

Sgt. Sage Etsitty Jr., who served as a data systems administrator in the Marine Corps, attended as the youngest veteran. He has participated in round table events since joining the Marine Corps.

"I love the veterans here. They are my close friends. I am always thinking about how they are doing. I am happy to attend and reconnect with my fellow comrades," Etsitty said.

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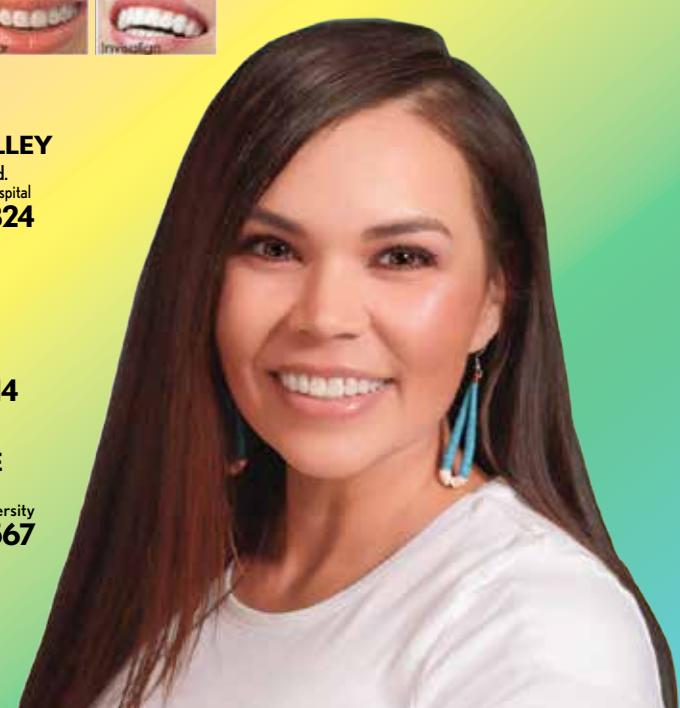


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cause I belong to an American Legion post. Facebook and text messages are important to keep veterans in the loop."

"Walking through the doors and asking for help is still an issue. Encouraging community members to make that first step needs to be a priority," said John James. "There are a lot of services available for our people. I want to share that with you."

"If one is looking for specific information, you have to seek and find it. No one is going to do the work for you," said Dickson. "The military taught me a lot. It

# 81<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Iwo Jima Flag Raising

## February 21, 2026

**Military Parade and  
Flyover to begin at 8:30 AM.  
Ceremonies to follow at the  
Mathew B. Juan, Ira H. Hayes  
Veterans Memorial Park in  
Sacaton, AZ.**

*All Public and Veterans Groups are Welcome*



Luncheon hosted by American Legion Auxiliary Unit No. 84 with St. Peters Church and School. Event sponsored by American Legion Ira H. Hayes Post No. 84 and Auxiliary Unit No. 84. Mailing Address: P.O. Box 186, Sacaton, AZ, 85147 / Phone: 520.562.8484 / Fax: 520.562.3297 / Email: [ihpost84@gilanet.net](mailto:ihpost84@gilanet.net)

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# Whirlwind Golf Club's Cattail Course Named Arizona's Best Public Golf Course for 2026



Cattail at Whirlwind Golf Club was ranked the # 1 Public Golf Course in Arizona, with Devil's Claw coming in at # 4, in Golfers' Choice 2026 by GolfPass. Gila River Development

## Submitted By Gila River Development

CHANDLER, Ariz. In a state famous for golf, the Whirlwind Golf Club stands out as the best in Arizona. Whirlwind Golf Club – Cattail Course has been named the “Best Public Golf Course in Arizona – Golfers’ Choice 2026” by GolfPass, a leading golf travel website.

The course topped a list of 25 public courses named in a Feb. 4 article published on GolfPass.com.

The number one ranking was based on guest feedback and reviews submitted by everyday golfers. Guests who played at Whirlwind consistently gave glowing

comments—high enough to elevate Cattail above a wide range of notable options across the state.

“We love this list because you cannot pay to be placed on it. It is based 100% on guest feedback,” said Louie Unga, Regional Manager – Operations of Whirlwind and Toka Sticks Golf Club.

Not to be outdone, Whirlwind’s second course—Devil’s Claw—was named the number-four public course in the state in the same article. Whirlwind Golf Club is the only 36-hole facility with both courses ranked in the top five.

Unga also credited Gila River Development and the Gila River Development Board for their ongoing support and lead-

ership.

“It says a lot about the experience we provide and the support we receive from the board and the Gila River Development team.”

Duncan Wiston, Gila River Development General Manager, echoed Unga’s remarks, noting that Whirlwind is one of the many bright spots in the Wild Horse Pass area.

“Whirlwind Golf Club stands as a testament to the vision, dedication, and craftsmanship of the Gila River Indian Community. Our Community’s leaders imagined and built a facility that not only reflects the beauty of our land but also represents the pride we take in delivering exceptional

quality and unforgettable experiences. It is truly an honor for GRD and our Board of Directors to help carry that legacy forward—ensuring Whirlwind continues to hold its place as one of the region’s leading golf destinations,” said Wiston.

GolfPass reviewed 215 courses in 2025 supported by 19,195 guest reviews. GolfPass used a requirements model that considered the timing of each review along with a rating index to determine each ranking. According to the article, the list, led by Whirlwind’s Cattail, reflects the best experiences for “everyday golfers.”

**FEBRUARY 19 – 20, 2026**



You are cordially invited to attend

## GILA RIVER CONNECTIONS: A Celebration of Shared History

This community gathering will bring together Japanese American camp survivors, their descendants, members of the Gila River Indian Community, students, and allies to honor the intertwined history of Japanese American and Native American communities and the shared experience of displacement, resettlement and forced assimilation.

Sponsored by the Huhugam Heritage Center, the Arizona Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League and the Poston Community Alliance, the gathering will simultaneously honor the history of Japanese American incarcerees and the sovereignty of GRIC lands and provide opportunities for community-building and shared healing. The event is being made possible by the JACL National Legacy Grant Project, the Henry and Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation and JA Community Foundation.

**FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19TH 6:30PM-9:30PM**

- Screening of the short film, The Blue Jay, by Marlene Shigekawa, Executive Director of the Poston Community Alliance
- Screening of the feature documentary Taking Our Place by Antonia Grace Glenn, which explores the intersections of Japanese American, African American and Native American communities during and after World War II
- Panel featuring the filmmakers and community elders
- Community reception

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20TH 1:00PM-4:00PM**

- Panel discussion featuring Japanese American and GRIC elders and community leaders
- Lecture on baseball by Bill Staples, Jr., President of the JACL - Arizona Chapter
- Lecture on Gila River Camp archeology by Koji Lau-Ozawa, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, UCLA
- Community reception

For additional information, please visit <https://jaclaz.org/event/gila-river-connections/> or Email: [gilariverconnections@gmail.com](mailto:gilariverconnections@gmail.com)

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# The Danger of Vaping

## A Silent Threat Among Young People

**Miguel Sallard**  
Managing Editor

It's increasingly common to see teenagers gathered on street corners, in parks, and other public spaces vaping, often in the company of friends. For many, this practice represents being "in style" or trying to look "cool," without considering the real risk involved.

There's a widespread belief that vaping is less harmful than cigarettes. Some people even claim that vaping has helped them quit smoking. However, it remains a major source of exposure to nicotine, a highly addictive substance legally accessible worldwide, that directly impacts brain development and lung health.

According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), youth ages 14 and older, including young adults between 20 and 25 years old, have been exposed to vaping. This growing trend is driven in part by enticing flavors and aromas

offered by vape devices, without users realizing the chemicals they inhaling. In addition to nicotine, substances such as nickel, tin, lead, flavoring like diacetyl, and other harmful chemicals are present in vaping aerosol. These compounds have been linked to anxiety, depression, lack of concentration, chronic bronchitis, and cardiovascular disease that can lead to heart attacks.

Most teenagers are unaware of the real risk of vaping. Parents, on the other hand, often don't notice what their children are keeping in their rooms or what they are sharing among friends. Vape devices come in various shapes and can resemble pens, makers, or USB drivers, making them difficult to identify.

But what's REALLY in that puff?

It could smell like mango, strawberry, watermelon or mint, but inside it? There's stuff you wouldn't want near your body:

Nicotine: Messes with brain development, memory, and focus.

Propylene: The main base liquids that create the vapor.

Heavy metal: Yep, stuff like lead, tin, and nickel.

Diacetyl: A chemical linked to "popcorn lungs" (Google it, it's nasty)

What it does to YOU?

Vaping doesn't just hit your lungs; it hits your mental health too:

Anxiety. Depression. Trouble concentrating. Addiction.

So, before you hit that vape... think. Protect your vibe. Protect your lungs. You only get one set.

Some groups of middle and high school students use e-cigarettes at a higher percentage than others. For example, in 2024 More females than males reported current e-cigarettes use.

Current use of e-cigarettes varied by race and ethnicity.

Non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native students: 11.5%

Non-Hispanic Black or African American students: 7.0%

Non-Hispanic multiracial students: 6.6%

Hispanic or Latino students: 6.1%

Non-Hispanic White students: 5.9 %

Non-Hispanic Asian students: 2.3%

Resources: Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1. Jamal A, Park-Lee, E, Birdsey J, et al. Tobacco product use among middle and high school students – National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.



A collection of vaporizers with a different design. CDC/Imagines



MISS GILA RIVER JR. MISS GILA RIVER

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**Jr. Miss Gila River Eligibility Criteria**

Young women between the ages of 13-17 years of age on or before February 13, 2026

- Enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community
- Have never before held the Title of Jr. Miss Gila River
- Must be a full-time student with a minimum 2.0 G.P.A.
- Must be single, never married, and have no children
- Must not be cohabitating (living) with an intimate companion
- Must be willing and able to uphold the image and leadership role of Jr. Miss Gila River throughout their reign



**Miss Gila River Eligibility Criteria**

Young women between the ages of 18-24 years of age on or before February 13, 2026

- Enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community
- Have never before held the Title of Miss Gila River
- Must be a full-time high school or college student with a minimum 2.0 G.P.A. or employed full-time and in good standing with employer
- Must be single, never married, and have no children
- Must not be cohabitating (living) with an intimate companion
- Must be willing and able to uphold the image and leadership role of Miss Gila River throughout their reign



For more information email [missgilariver@girc.nsn.us](mailto:missgilariver@girc.nsn.us) or call (520) 562-9715

## GRIC's First NFL FLAG Tournament

### From Front Page

Special guests included former Cardinals players Andre Roberts, Hamza Abdullah, JJ Nelson and Xavier Williams, along with team mascot Big Red. Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis and Lt. Gov. Regina Antone also attended to support the youth.

The former players spoke to participants about their athletic journeys, encouraged them to stay active in sports and took part in a meet-and-greet photo opportunity.

"One of our longest partnerships in the Valley is with Gila River, so it means a lot to us to come out here and support the Gila River Indian Community and really expand our efforts in youth flag football," said Katelyn Stys, senior manager of partnership marketing for the Arizona Cardinals.

She explained that over the last three to five years, youth football and flag football have been major initiatives for both the Cardinals and the NFL.

"It's really exciting to see a three-way partnership between the NFL, the Cardinals and Gila River all come together here today."

An integral part of the program is the volunteer coaches who support the youth. Luevano shared that when she began working

with TRW, there were only four Community-member coaches in GRIC.

"They would coach every single sport, so we made it a mission to develop coaches in the Community first," Luevano said. "We were able to get up to 51 coaches that we now work with in the Community, and we're trying to provide them the tools to be successful."

She added that with robust recreational programming, communities' statistical data shows a 38% to 48% drop in juvenile delinquency and violent crimes.

"We look at the work we do here in the Community as more than providing an outlet for kids to play a sport. We're looking at it as an opportunity to create healing and wellness in the Community through sports," Luevano said. "We work really hard to make sure every event we put on is welcoming and provides an opportunity for people—regardless of skill level or physical or mental disabilities—to participate."

The Gila River Indian Community and Arizona Cardinals Youth Football program continue working together to expand access to high-quality youth sports programs, ensuring Indigenous youth have meaningful opportunities to learn, compete and thrive.



Young players sprint downfield during the igaugural all-Indigenous NFL FLAG Tournament at the Sacaton Fairgrounds on Jan. 31 Emma Hughes/GRIN



More than 140 young athletes competed at the Sacaton Fairgraounds as TRWD, the Arizona Cardinals and GRRC celebrated a growing partnership in youth sports. Emma Hughes/GRIN



Collaborative Cardinals medal and championship rings. Emma Hughes/GRIN



Former Arizona Cardinals players meet with youth participants. Emma Hughes/GRIN



Big Red greets young athletes during the tournament. Emma Hughes/GRIN



Young athletes from across the Community competed in single elimination games. Emma Hughes/GRIN



**Jeston Morris**  
Gila River Indian News

CHANDLER, Ariz. — The Huhugam Heritage Center (HHC) hosted the Ho'ok A'aga Winter Storytelling event in its amphitheater on Jan. 24. The gathering took place outdoors under the stars, where attendees kept warm beside campfires and outdoor heaters.

According to Robert Johnson, a language specialist at HHC, Ho'ok A'aga means "the Telling of the Witch" and refers to the O'otham Creation Story. The Creation Stories are traditionally told only when rattlesnakes are hibernating. As noted in the document, "The storytelling ceases when the rattlesnake emerges from their den in the spring," due to the belief that a rattlesnake will seek out and bite anyone who tells the stories out of season.



**Children and their parents also enjoyed the stories shared throughout the event.**

Jeston Morris/GRIN

The Creation Stories typically take four nights to tell in full. Multiple versions exist, each with slight variations. Among Akimel O'otham, renowned storytellers include Juan Smith, William Smith Allison and Thin Leather.

Henrietta Lopez, a District 4 Santan community member, served as master of ceremonies. Former Lt. Gov. Robert Stone delivered the opening blessing in O'otham. He later shared a story and sang songs. William Allen gave the first lecture, followed by Barnaby Lewis. Each story-

telling session lasted about 40 minutes and included a question and answer period.

Lopez welcomed attendees in both O'otham and English and provided an overview of the evening. A platform stage was set up for the speakers. "I welcome everyone to our storytelling event this evening. Whether you're a member or non-member, I encourage you to come back and bring your family members to hear the oral stories," she said.

Allen, the first speaker, delivered his lecture primarily in English with O'otham words woven throughout. He began by sharing his background. Raised in Vah ki (Casa Blanca), he said both of his grandfathers were Tohono O'odham and noted that he has relatives in all seven districts, including District 8, Santa Rosa and Sells, drawing laughter from the audience.

"Certain sections of the stories are going to repeat themselves. The stories

I am telling you come from Gila River. I hope someone carries these stories on. Allow the stories to enter your mind. Listen not only with your ears but also with your heart," Allen said.

He explained that O'otham oral stories often center on animals. "The O'otham stories are meant to be told in four nights. The portion of the story I am telling you this evening is the ending part. It is based on J. William Lloyd's documented O'odham story," he added.

Allen's Story Summary.

## Ho'ok A'aga: Winter Storytelling



**William "Bill" Allen telling the story of "How Soft Child (S-mik Ali) Became Rattlesnake".** Jeston Morris/GRIN

**How Soft Child (S-mik Ali) Became Rattlesnake:** Soft Child, who was constantly teased, asked Se'ehe (Elder Brother) for help. Soft Child was given fangs and rattles and would shake his rattle as a warning. To:bí (Cottontail) ignored the warning, was bitten and died.

**The Burning of Cottontail's Body:** To prevent Ban (Coyote) from digging up the body, To:bí was burned. The document notes that "the Maricopa's custom of burning deceased human body is still practiced, though it is becoming rare." Ban was chased throughout Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'otham lands but eventually escaped and devoured To:bí's heart atop S modal, meaning "greasy mountain," referring to South Mountain.

Lopez then introduced Lewis, a master storyteller with extensive knowledge of O'otham epistemology, ontology and cultural teachings. Lewis sang O'otham songs, shifted tone and pitch throughout his presentation, and delivered his story primarily in O'otham with English translation. His story centered on a witch who stole and ate children.

Reflecting on the tradition, Lewis said, "It's the desire of our O'otham people [to] reassert and reestablish our oral tradition by telling the narratives during the winter season. These stories originated in ancient time with our Hu Hu Kam ancestors." He added, "Our hope is these stories will generate interest and understanding as well as perpetuate the O'otham Himdag way of life."

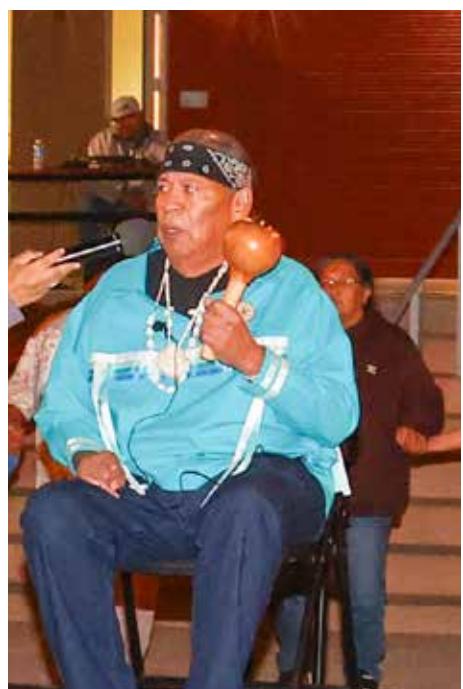
The final speaker, former Lt. Gov. Robert Stone, began his lecture in O'otham before switching to English. He shared that O'otham was his first language and that he began learning English at age 6. His lecture focused on his personal journey of learning O'otham songs.

Stone said he had always wanted to learn the songs, but the opportunity came when he was 40. He is a Traditional Song and Dance Teacher at Casa Blanca Community School. "I would listen and listen, but I was unable to understand some of the words in the song. I was interested in learning song vocabulary. I finally went to Lewis and asked him for song lessons," Stone said.

Lewis traveled to Tucson to teach him. "In our initial lesson, Lewis taught me about the song language and the spoken language. Understanding the difference is crucial because it really helped me acquire the words in the song," Stone said.

He explained that spoken O'otham sounds natural to the ear, but in songs, words follow a rhythmic structure that changes their phonetic form. Lewis taught him both the phonetic shifts and the semantic meanings.

At the conclusion of the event, Stone sang a song, and attendees joined in an O'otham social dance. The Huhugam Heritage Center's storytelling event was considered a success and exceeded expectations. Lopez expressed appreciation on behalf of HHC to all volunteers, including firekeepers, servers and ushers.



**Robert Stone signs O'otham song.** Jeston Morris/GRIN



**Community members began arriving early and setting in to listen to the stories being shared.** Jeston Morris/GRIN



## Department of Land Use Planning and Zoning

# RESCHEDULED PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

Project Name:

Riggs Road Storage

For:

Zoning Change

Location:

East of Interstate 10 & North of Riggs Road

Date and Time of Public Hearing:

March 7, 2026 at 9:00 AM

Place:

District Four Service Center

Notice is hereby given that the Gila River Indian Community's Natural Resources Standing Committee on **Saturday, March 7, 2026 at 9:00 a.m.** in District Four at the Service Center 1510 West Sesame Street Sacaton, AZ 85147, will hold a public hearing to discuss and consider a Zoning Change Application submitted by Riggs Road Storage LLC for a proposed retail store and outdoor storage site.

The public hearing is to solicit public comments on the proposed Zoning Change and allow the Natural Resources Standing Committee to review and verify that the proposed Zoning Change, as it is submitted, contains such requirements and safeguards as are necessary to protect adjoining property and the public's health and safety.

Public comments can be submitted prior to the public hearing by emailing the Department of Land Use Planning and Zoning at [LUPZSupportGroup@gric.nsn.us](mailto:LUPZSupportGroup@gric.nsn.us) and cc [PlanningDevelopmentTeam@gric.nsn.us](mailto:PlanningDevelopmentTeam@gric.nsn.us). Any questions may be directed to Corinna Ortiz, Project Manager at [PlanningDevelopmentTeam@gric.nsn.us](mailto:PlanningDevelopmentTeam@gric.nsn.us) or (520) 562-6003.

**PUBLIC HEARING IS FOR MEMBERS OF THE GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY ONLY.**

**REFRESHMENTS WILL BE PROVIDED.**



If you have any questions, please contact the Planning Development Team at the Department of Land Use Planning & Zoning (520) 562-6003 Monday – Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

# District 2 Ballpark Set for Major Renovation and Expansion

*Project to Add New Amenities, Cultural Spaces and Year-Round Recreation for Families*

**Emma Hughes**  
Gila River Indian News

The District 2 ballpark is set to undergo significant changes as part of a new improvement project that will renovate and expand the existing facility next to the District 2 Service Center, transforming the area into a multiuse recreational hub for residents of all ages.

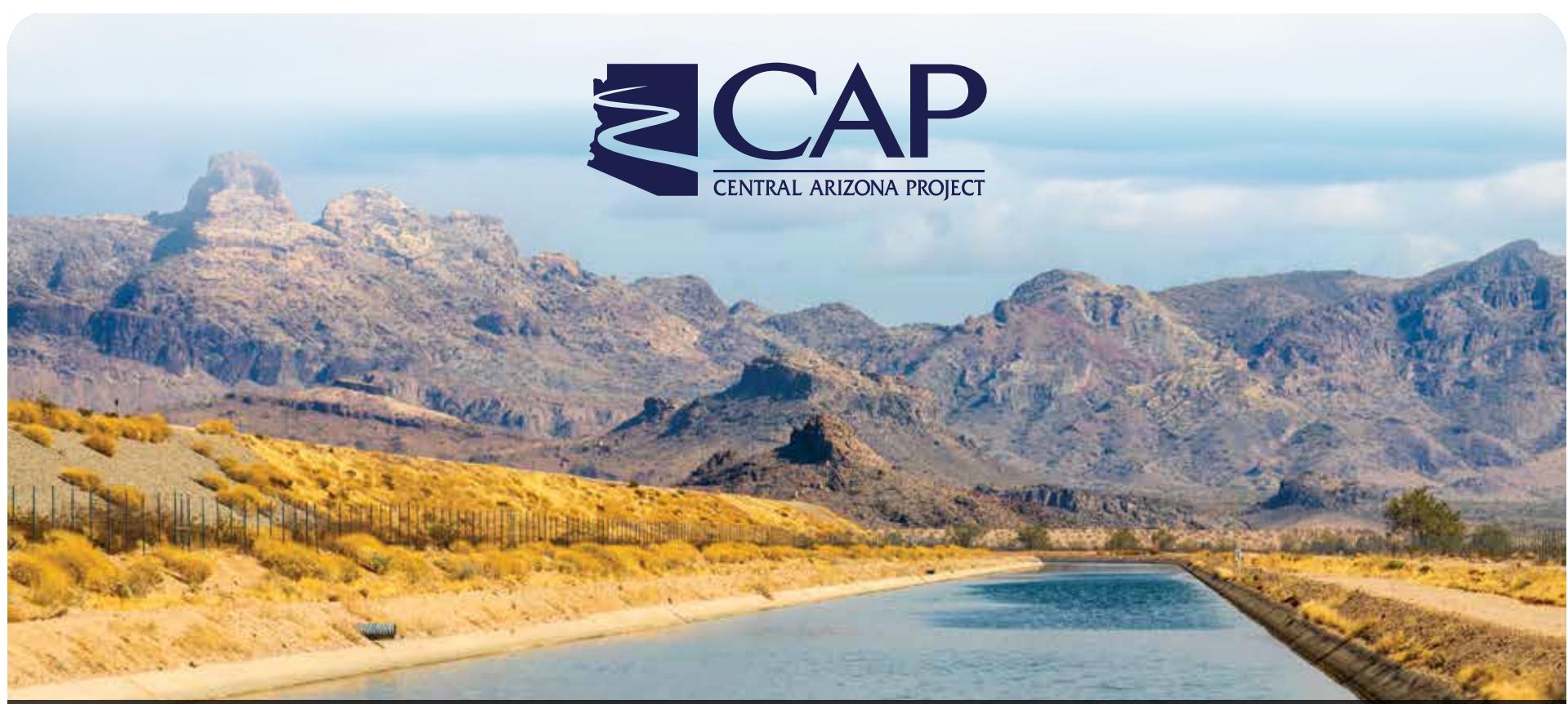
The District 2 Service Center and Tribal Projects Development announced plans to enhance the ballpark while adding a variety of new amenities designed to encourage year-round community use. New additions will include a parking lot with drop-off area, park grills and ramadas to accommodate family gatherings, birthday celebrations and community events.

A new walking trail and sidewalks are also part of the project, creating a safer and more accessible pathways throughout the park. The expansion will include the construction of a skatepark and basketball courts. One of the most unique features is the planned storytelling area, complete with seating and a fireplace. The space is envisioned as a gathering place for community events, educational programs and evening activities, blending recreation with culture and connection.

The project will also include renovation to the existing bathroom facilities, grass replacement for the ballfield and installations of a new irrigation system. Jeved Construction, a local and Native American woman-owned business from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, will be handle the project, which is expected to be completed by the end of the year.



The image above depicts the existing ballpark, while the image below present the proposed renovation plan.  
Emma Hughes/GRIN



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# Arizona Department of Transportation selects Coffman-Fisher and Stantec design-build team for final segment of the I-10 Wild Horse Pass Corridor Improvements

\$410 million project will improve connectivity and safety along one of Arizona's most congested commuter routes

## NEWS RELEASE:

PHOENIX, AZ (February 11, 2026)

The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) has selected the Coffman-Fisher design-build team, consisting of Coffman Specialties, Inc., Fisher Sand & Gravel Company, and lead designer Stantec Consulting Services Inc. to deliver the northern segment of the I-10 Wild Horse Pass Corridor improvements project that will enhance safety and mobility between Phoenix and Tucson along I-10.

The project will cover approximately 12 miles of I-10 in Arizona, from Loop 202 to the Gila River Bridges, within the Gila River Indian Community. Improvements will include the addition of one general-purpose lane and one high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane in each direction from Loop 202 to south of Riggs Road. They will also include the addition of one general purpose lane in each direction from south of Riggs Road to the Gila River Bridges. Other improvements include interchange modifications at Wild Horse Pass, Queen Creek (SR 347), Riggs Road, a new interchange at Koli Road, and rehabilitation of the Goodyear Road grade separated structure over I-10. Additional enhancements include intelligent transportation systems (ITS), lighting, signals, signing and pavement markings, and drainage improvements throughout the corridor.

The project is a collaboration between ADOT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Maricopa Association of Governments. The total estimated project value for this segment is \$410 million, with the overall corridor program valued at roughly \$1 billion.

### Community and economic impact

The corridor is a major commuter and freight route, connecting the Gila River Indian Community to the Maricopa and Pinal counties and serves as a primary connector



Expanding I-10 through the Gila River Indian Community 12 miles of new capacity, including one general-purpose lane and one HOV lane. Photo/AZDOT

to people traveling between Phoenix and Chandler and the bedroom communities through SR 347. The improvements will address longstanding bottleneck issues along the corridor, reduce congestion for up to 126,000 vehicles daily, and enhance safety by adding additional lanes in each direction. The project will also support growth within the Gila River Indian Community, encouraging new development and providing enhanced access to the Wild Horse Pass Resort and Casino. Additionally, ADOT will work with the Tribal Employment Rights Office to create jobs for community members during construction.

"The I-10 corridor serves as a vital connector between Tucson and Phoenix, and we welcome the opportunity to help improve the connectivity of these commu-

nities," said Robert Lemke, senior project manager at Stantec. "Working alongside ADOT and Coffman-Fisher as our design-build partner, we will deliver a safer and more connected commuter experience across Arizona."

Improving freight movement along this vital corridor will also support Arizona's economy, especially manufacturing and logistics hubs in Casa Grande and Phoenix. State leaders view this as a key driver for future economic development.

### Innovative approach to save costs

In initial planning with ADOT and the project stakeholders, the design-build team created an alternative approach to the originally proposed corridor improvement plans. Replacing the entire stretch of existing asphalt with new concrete pavement

will provide a 30-year lifespan at nearly the same cost as new asphalt, resulting in significant long-term maintenance savings for ADOT. This innovation was made possible through the design-build delivery method, allowing for alternative technical concepts and efficient construction phasing.

Stantec has a long history of supporting highway and roadway design across the United States. The firm led design on the Loop 375 Border Highway West Extension Project in El Paso, Texas, a highway project designed to provide better connectivity around the City of El Paso, lessen congestion and make the roadway safer for commuters. The company is also leading design on improvements to the Golden Glades Interchange in Miami-Dade County, Florida, a vital connector in the region.

## Announcements & Notices

IN THE CHILDREN'S COURT OF THE GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY IN THE STATE OF ARIZONA	
IN THE MATTER OF:  Minor A.R., Minor V.R., Minor Z.R.  Minor Child(ren)	Case No. JC-2026-0006-GU,  NOTICE OF HEARING
<p><b>TO:</b> Kristy Jones Mail Returned- No forwarding address</p> <p>Please take notice that a hearing has been scheduled in the Gila River Indian Children's Court. If you fail to appear a judgment may be issued in favor of the other party.</p> <p>This matter has been scheduled at the place, date, and time set forth below:</p> <p><b>Answer/Response Hearing</b> <b>DATE:</b> April 21, 2026 <b>TIME:</b> 10:00 AM</p> <p><b>LOCATION:</b> AKIMEL O'OTHAM LODITHA KUD KI 721 West Seed Farm Road Sacaton, AZ 85147</p> <p>GIVEN under my hand and the seal of the Gila River Indian Community Children's Court, in the State of Arizona.</p> <p>DATED: February 10, 2026</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>/s/ Renee Flores</i> Renee Flores Clerk of the Children's Court</p>	
<p>Notified By: <input type="checkbox"/> Process Services   <input type="checkbox"/> Regular Mail   <input type="checkbox"/> Certified Mail   <input type="checkbox"/> Inner-Office Mail   <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GRIN Publication</p>	

**\*\*NOTICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT\*\***

**PROPOSED LEASE FOR**

**GILA RIVER GAMING ENTERPRISES, INC.**

The Natural Resource Standing Committee ("NRSC") will be considering the Environmental Assessment Form ("EAF") from the Gila River Gaming Enterprises, Inc., regarding a proposed lease of approximately one hundred and fifty-nine one hundredth (159.100) acres of Community Trust land for the purposes of developing and operating a hotel, gaming, restaurant, spa facility and related uses in District 4 of the Gila River Indian Reservation, at their regular meeting on **February 24, 2026 at 9:00 a.m.**, located in Conference Room C of the Community Council Secretary's Office. A copy of the EAF in its entirety is available for review at all District Service Centers and the Community Council Secretary's Office.

If you are interested in providing comments to the EAF, please attend the scheduled NRSC meeting. You may also contact your Council representative or the NRSC Chairperson at (520) 562-9720. Written comments may be received until January 27, 2026 via email to Pima Leasing & Financing Corporation on behalf of the Natural Resources Standing Committee at [info@theplfc.com](mailto:info@theplfc.com) or mailed to Pima Leasing & Financing Corporation, 5350 N. 48th St., Suite #245, Chandler, AZ 85226.

**Proposed Victims of Crime Client Services Office in Sacaton, Arizona**

**Notice of Availability—Draft Environmental Assessment:** In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) has completed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) that examines the potential environmental impacts of the Gila River Indian Community proposal to demolish an existing modular building and install a new modular facility that better supports confidential client services, staff operations, and program growth (the proposed action). NEPA requires that federal agencies consider the effects of a proposed action and any reasonable alternatives on the human environment. This draft EA evaluates the potential impacts that would result from the implementation of the proposed action as compared to the No Action alternative.

The draft EA is available upon request. Please send an email request to [info@clarkgrouppllc.com](mailto:info@clarkgrouppllc.com). The draft EA will be provided in electronic format unless a hard copy is specifically requested.

**Project Title:** Gila River Indian Community Victim Services Office

**Project Proponent:** OVC

**Project Location:** 48 East Pima Street, Sacaton, Arizona 85147

**Purpose of the Proposed Action:** The purpose of the project is to expand the number of services provided and the number of residents served each year. Although the new modular building would be located within the same general footprint, changes to the internal configuration would allow the facility to accommodate approximately 14 staff, compared to the 10 staff currently housed in the existing modular. The additional office space and improved layout would also enable the Victims Services Department to introduce new services, including referrals related to missing persons and homicide cases. With the addition of staff and expanded service offerings, the Program anticipates it would be able to increase the total number of referrals supported by approximately 25 percent. The new facility would provide adequate space to support expanded assistance with filing for crime victim compensation, victim advocacy and case management, client intake interviews, eligibility screening and assessment, accompanying clients to court, ensuring culturally appropriate services, crisis intervention and 24-hour response for clients, literacy education and job training, medical and dental care referrals, mental health counseling for adults and children, transportation assistance, support groups, and long-term case management.

**Proposed Action Description:** The proposed action is to demolish and replace an existing approximately 30-year-old victim services modular building. The existing modular structure would be demolished using standard construction equipment, with all debris removed from the site and disposed of at a permitted off-reservation landfill, followed by installation of a new modular facility within the same footprint. The replacement modular building would measure approximately 66 feet by 42 feet, be designed for a minimum 20-year operational lifespan, and support confidential client services, staff operations, and program growth. The facility would accommodate approximately 14 staff and up to 10 clients at a time. Existing utilities, including electricity, water, and sewer, would continue to serve the site, with limited trenching only as necessary for reconnection; no new utility corridors, parking areas, sidewalks, or paved features would be constructed. Heating and cooling would be provided by electric hot water systems and triple-wide HVAC units.

**Public Comments:** OVC is accepting comments on this EA from February 13, 2026, through the end of the day of March 15, 2026. Comments should be submitted by email to [info@clarkgrouppllc.com](mailto:info@clarkgrouppllc.com), or mailed to The Clark Group, LLC, 137 Elm Street, Montpelier, VT 05602.

**Date of Posting:** February 13, 2026



# Gila River Police Department

## Crime Analysis Unit (CAU)

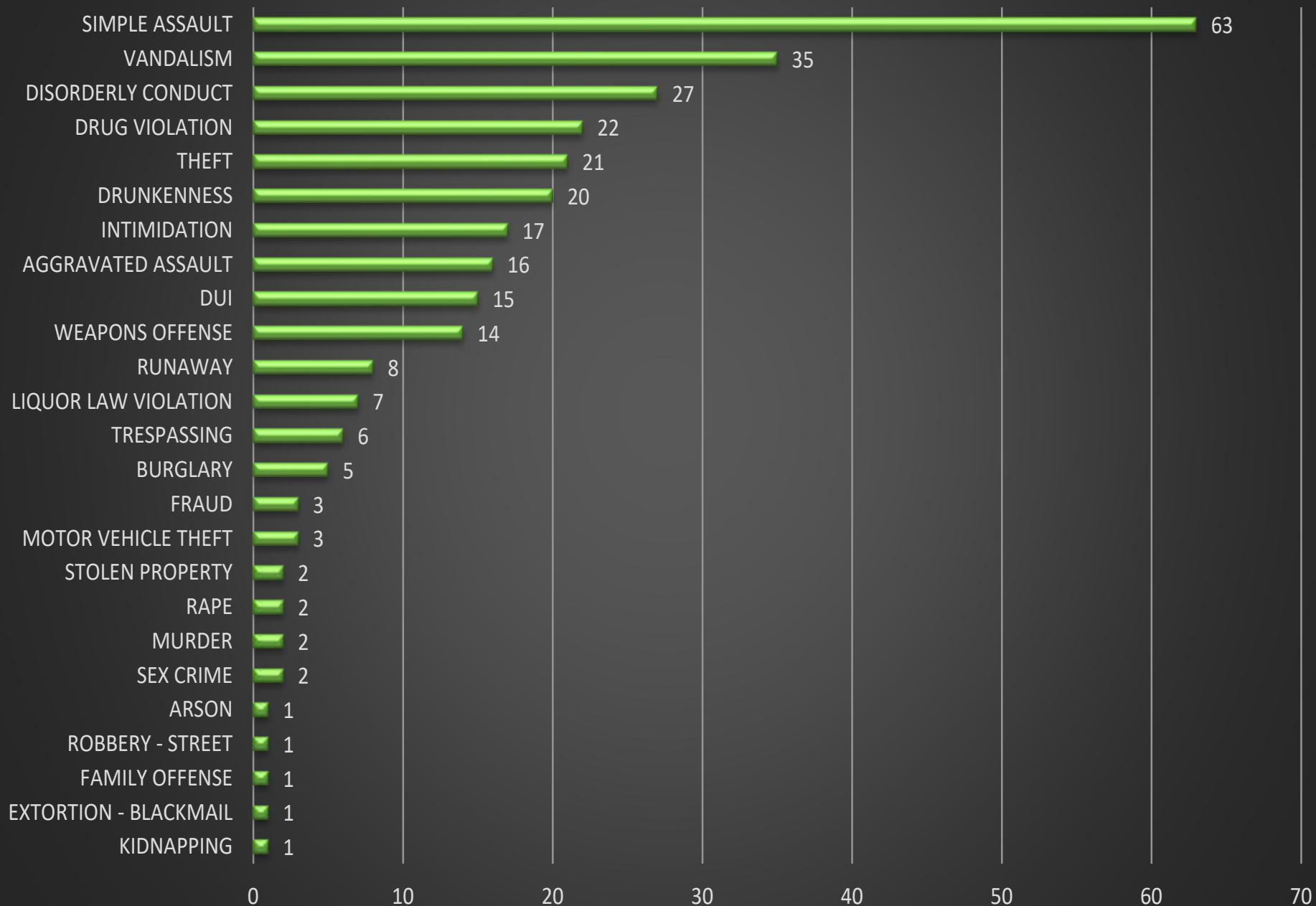


### 2026 January Crime Report

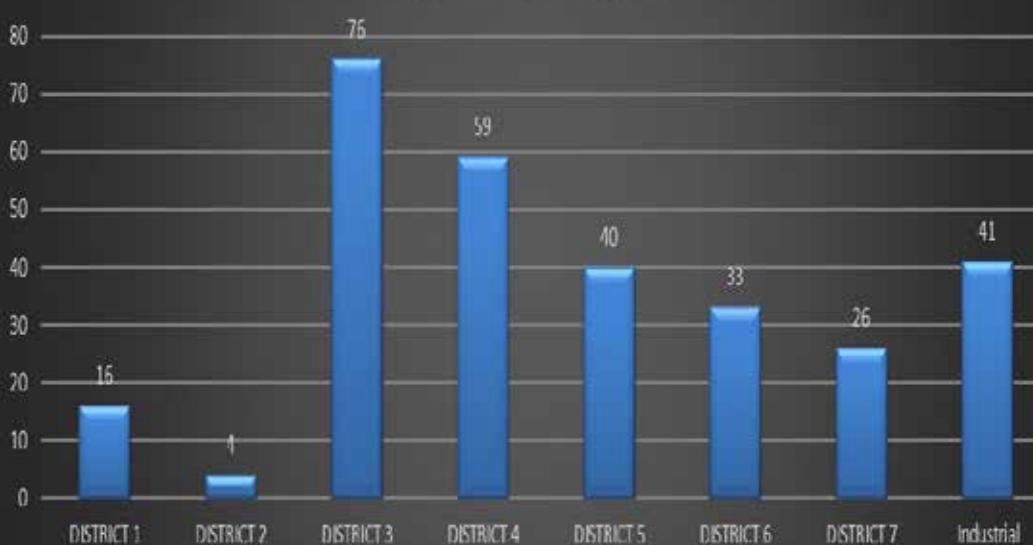
#### Crime Data Report:

Summarizes crime and shots fired incidents that were reported to the Gila River Police Department (GRPD). The metrics included in this report are the crimes by type, crimes by district, and shots fired related calls for service. This report includes data from January 1<sup>st</sup> - January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026

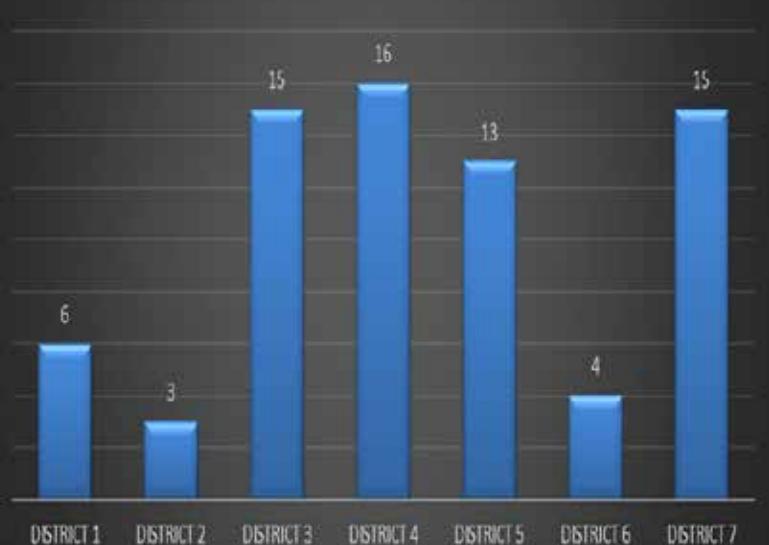
#### COMMUNITY WIDE CRIME TYPES



#### CRIMES BY DISTRICT



#### "SHOT FIRED" CALLS FOR SERVICE BY DISTRICT





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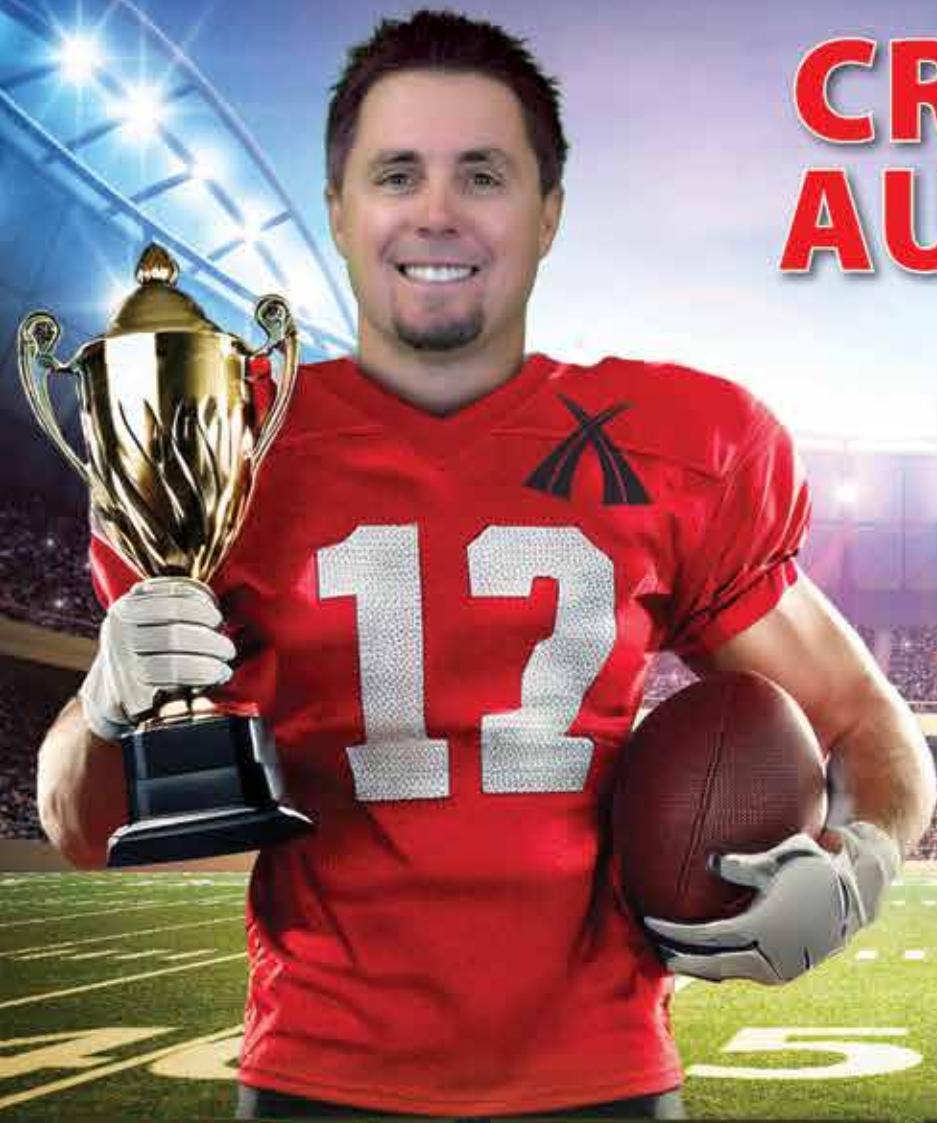
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# Celebrating American Heart Month

February is recognized nationally as American Heart Month, a time to emphasize cardiovascular health, as heart disease remains the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States.

## Tips to lower the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease:



**Eat healthy**



**Keep a healthy weight**



**Be physically active**



**Get enough sleep**



**No smoking & avoiding alcohol**



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