Language Revitalization Strategy
The Center for Interior Salish

Background

Historically, the Spokane area is a meeting point for three major Interior Salish languages: Coeur d'Alene, Spokane-Pend Oreille, and Nselxcin. The Coeur d'Alene language was dominant from Spokane Falls to the east; dialects of the Spokane-Pend Oreille language were spoken in the Chewelah valley, and on the Spokane and Pend Oreille rivers to their confluences with the Columbia; Nselxcin was spoken in the Colville Valley and on the Columbia river from Revelstoke in British Columbia down to the mouth of the Spokane River.

Today, we find all of these languages deeply endangered. The Spokane dialect has only a handful of fully fluent speakers, all over the age of 65. Coeur d'Alene is in equally dire straits. The Pend Oreille dialect, including Kalispel, is more robust, counting on some younger, more able speakers and a supporting population of Pend Oreille speakers in Montana. Nselxcin has the most speakers, estimated to be between 500 and 1000 in number. However, most Nselxcin speakers are in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. Among the Nselxcin dialects of the Colville Valley and the Northern Columbia, there are only a few elderly fluent speakers.

All of the Spokane area tribes have official language preservation programs. The Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Kalispel, and Colville Confederated Tribes are working to document the languages and dialects that were traditionally dominant in their reservation communities. Most of these programs were begun in the 1970s or later. These preservation programs have had some positive results with regard to the documentation of the languages and the creation of materials that can be used to learn and teach language. They have also offered some reservation-based language classes. However, from the time of Euro-American contact there has been a steady decline of fluent speakers of Interior Salish languages. This trend has accelerated in the last 30 years, and all Interior Salish languages are now extremely endangered.

The Center for Interior Salish was formed in response to this crisis of extinction. The Center seeks to actively work toward creating fluent speakers of Interior Salish languages. The approach of The Center is unique in that services are provided to committed individuals and families, with a focus on all people who are descended from the original Interior
Salish people. Services are provided regardless of any contemporary statutory Tribal affiliation, status, or residency. The Center seeks to serve all Interior Salish people, including tribal members, multi-tribal, and multiracial people. Services will be provided to people living in all communities, from the reservations to cities and in between.

**Strategy Introduction**

The language revitalization strategy of The Center for Interior Salish focuses on creating individual Salish speakers, Salish-speaking families, and Salish language communities. This strategy has been approved and adopted by the Board of Directors of The Center, and implementation of the strategy began in 2005. Given the perilous state of Interior Salish languages, it must be recognized that initial efforts will be small in scale. As committed individuals begin to bring the language to their families, larger scale elements of the strategy will begin to be implemented. As a first step however, the focus is on a small number of individuals gaining language competence and fluency.

**Individuals**

The Interior Salish language crisis is caused by the passing of fluent speakers and the failure to create new speakers. Presently, there are few Interior Salish people who are learning their heritage languages. Many people are not interested in learning. Others are discouraged by the lack of effective teaching and curricular materials. Still others lack the personal resources that would allow them to commit to learning their language. The Center for Interior Salish seeks to identify and support those individuals who are interested in committing themselves to gaining competence and fluency in their heritage language.

While there are efforts by linguists and Tribes to document Interior Salish languages, and to preserve the knowledge of living speakers through recordings and transcriptions, the strategy of The Center focuses on living preservation- the transmission of the language knowledge of living speakers to other people through language acquisition and communication. The strategy of The Center calls for the creation of a cadre of new, capable fluent speakers who can pass the language on to their families and to other committed individuals. In order to achieve this goal, The Center is creating a comprehensive, sequenced Interior Salish language curriculum that will allow people to efficiently and systematically gain language competence.
The Center and its staff have directly developed or guided the development of materials in Spokane, Kalispel and Nselxcin. With these materials in hand, individuals are now directly acquiring their heritage languages and beginning to communicate in Interior Salish.

Families

The ultimate goal of the living preservation strategy is for a child to experience Interior Salish as their first and primary language. That is virtually impossible today, because there are no speakers of childbearing or parenting age. Even many of the older current speakers were raised by their grandparents. In most cases, parent-child language transmission has not occurred for two generations. The Center for Interior Salish recognizes that successful long-term language revitalization depends upon families adopting Interior Salish as their first language. With that goal in mind, The Center seeks to provide language services to the families of those people who have committed to becoming fluent. While our strategy begins by focusing on creating single fluent individuals, a simultaneous effort is made to provide language services to other interested family members including spouses, children, parents, grandparents and others. With a committed, fluent individual at the epicenter, language synergy will be created by providing classes, media and family events that foster the use Interior Salish language.

Language Communities

Modern Interior Salish families face many pressures and obstacles to living a culture and human centered life. There are pressures to conform to the dominant, consumption based-lifestyle, and families continue to be plagued by the results of the colonial experience and by racism. As families begin to adopt Interior Salish as their primary language, they will need the support of other families who are on the same journey. For this reason, The Center for Interior Salish will work to create points of contact where language learning families can interact in Salish and form a broader language community. Ultimately, language communities will be formed around particular dialects and languages, but a broader Interior Salish language community will also be fostered. The broader community might sponsor regional conferences and social events that promote the use of Interior Salish languages. The Center for Interior Salish will seek to encourage and empower all levels of community in order to support and
empower individuals and families as they reclaim and revitalize their heritage languages.

Conclusion and Summary
The Center for Interior Salish language revitalization strategy is a multitiered, living preservation model. The strategy calls for a sequential and systematic approach to bring Interior Salish languages alive in the modern era. Those steps are:

1. providing language services to committed individuals so that they may become fluent in Interior Salish language;
2. providing language services to the families of individual apprentice speakers in order to extend the transmission of language;
3. building language community among families, and;
4. building a broader community of support of all Interior Salish languages and dialects.