Author: Favian Kennedy, MSW

American Indian tribal nations are sovereign entities that predate federal and state governments. As sovereign nations, tribal governments have the right to be self-determined by establishing policies that impact the future of the tribal nation. While several factors affect the exercise of tribal sovereignty, tribal governments continue to press forward toward increased autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Faced with having to simultaneously address issues like economic development, healthcare, security, and education, the role that tribal government plays is of critical importance to the wellbeing of the tribal members who reside within jurisdictional land boundaries. Contemporary tribal governments are very different than those social and political organizations that tribal communities maintained prior to European colonization. However, the function of government to secure the economy, protect the public, and promote wellbeing has perhaps remained unchanged. Prior to colonization there was a greater "collective consciousness" among people of similar tribal affiliation and traditional cultural protocols were an effective mechanism for both regulating and motivating behavior. Unlike the modern era, rules were unwritten but much more internalized by the majority of the community. As opposed to the written policy provision, other very effective methods existed for communicating expected behavior. Social mores (fundamental values) and folkways (conventional practices, customs, and beliefs) were effective at limiting deviant behavior.

Examining the development of tobacco policy is one area where the transition from traditional to contemporary written policy can be illustrated. The case of tobacco policy is of particular importance in the Northern Plains because among many tribal nations tobacco and the Sacred Pipe are tantamount the law and are the cornerstone of cultural protocol. Among the Lakota tribes, it was *Pte San Win* "White Buffalo Calf Women" who brought the Sacred Pipe and with it came the Seven Sacred Rites and the rules by which human beings should live.

Cultural protocols govern the use of *canśaśa*, *kinnikinnick*, and other forms of *traditional tobacco*. According to dialogs with community elders who still maintain a traditional worldview, *traditional tobacco* is not intended for recreational use. In other tribal nations like the Anishinaabe, protocols exist which dictate which sacred plants should be used for specific occasions.[1] Addictive commercial tobacco use was not a part of the protocol.

As society transitioned from one that was held together by a shared collective consciousness to one with increased cultural diversity, written policy became increasingly necessary to ensure safety and maintain the value structure of tribal communities. And while traditional mores and folkways are still effective at influencing individual behavior among those who share the belief system, written policy has broad application and can be used to achieve an objective amongst a diverse population.

In the case of commercial tobacco it is now known that addictive tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure are very harmful to health. Commercial tobacco, whether in the form of cigarettes, cigars, biddies, or chew is detrimental to health and place a preventable strain upon scarce financial resources due to disease and loss of work productivity.

Many types of policies can be implemented to protect the public. The three main policy areas in regard to tobacco prevention include: 1. youth access restrictions; 2. smoke-free grounds; and 3. tobacco excise tax.

Youth Access Restrictions

The youth are the future and the best subpopulation to target for prevention. If tribal communities encourage young people to never start addictive tobacco use then they will not have to worry about getting them to quit as adults. One policy approach would aim to make sure commercial tobacco products never get into the hands of young people by educating retailers and establishing community norms where sales to minors are unacceptable.

Smoke-Free Ordinances

Everyone deserves the right to breathe clean air free of toxic secondhand smoke. 100% smoke-free workplaces, restaurants, community centers, and even casinos and bingo halls are becoming the norm in the U.S. and across the globe. The U.S. Surgeon General states that there is no safe level of secondhand smoke exposure and that even brief exposure can result in immediate harm. The National Native Commercial Tobacco Abuse Prevention Network provided linkages to assist tribes enact good quality smoke-free policies. Visit www.keepitsacred.org for more information.

Tobacco Excise Tax

The tobacco excise tax is the most effective way to curb smoking prevalence. There is a strong relationship between the unit cost of tobacco and the use of tobacco products. On average, as the unit price of tobacco increases by 10% youth smoking decreases by 7%, and adult smoking decreases by 3-5%.[2]

Each type of tobacco policy can do its part to secure the health of tribal members and reduces preventable tobacco related expenses. As sovereign nations tribal governments; however, must work with local tobacco policy advocates to determine the most appropriate means of implementing these policies according to what will be most congruent with the issues and the values of each respective community.

Citations

1. Derived from conversations with a tobacco health educator from the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

2. Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. Increasing the federal cigarette tax reduces smoking. (Accessed 2/25/08). Washington :DC, 2002.