

White Earth Tribal Building Adopts Smoke-Free Policy

Process of creating *CHANGE*



In August 2008, White Earth health educators Gina Boudreau and LaRaye Anderson were approached by the Executive

Director of the Tribe to create a smoke-free policy for the newly built tribal council and government building in White Earth, MN. In September, the health educators sent the Executive Director a draft of the policy to review. With his approval, they presented a slide show on secondhand smoke and data on community support to the Tribal Council and asked them to adopt the policy. In October, the Council approved the policy, which specified that the entire grounds would be smoke-free. As part of the policy change, all employees were sent a letter that announced the policy and detailed the cessation services available to help them quit smoking.

How did the policy get passed in just a few months time? *Goundwork!*

The White Earth health education department has been building their tobacco education and policy initiative since 1999, when they produced a public service announcement to educate about differences between commercial and traditional tobacco. Gina Boudreau and LaRaye Anderson have been staffing the effort from the beginning. Since their initial policy change successes in 2005 (creating smoke-free village parks), they have actively worked on 23 policy and program changes, including enhancing IHS clinical practice in cessation, formal/informal no smoking policies, and getting media placements in radio, newspapers, and theatre ads with messages about secondhand smoke and the sacredness of tobacco.

As Ms. Boudreau reflects “I would say that the leaders in the community know that we work on tobacco issues constantly and the fact that we are known tobacco advocates helped us to create part of the desired change in policy. I believe that others are starting to get the message that tobacco should be used in a sacred way.” The fact that the Executive Director approached them was an important indication of the health educators’ knowledge and respect in their community – and as they point out, this support from upper leadership and

management was a key reason the policy process worked as smoothly as it did.

However, the process was not all without setbacks. Initially, the policy stated that the entire grounds would be smoke-free. When people began to complain, the Council backed off from this restriction and changed the policy to allow smoking in the back areas of the parking lot. While the tobacco coalition was disappointed with this change in the policy, they created strong culturally-specific signage to make sure that the messages banning smoking anywhere near the building and promoting the sacredness of tobacco are still loud and clear.

Strategies for the *CHANGE*

White Earth health educators used a variety of strategies in their policy change work, including:

Taking Advantage of New Opportunities: The White Earth coalition uses a strategy which has proven to be successful: When new businesses or buildings open, jump on the opportunity to create a smoke-free policy from the get-go. This was a strong component for

getting the policy passed with the new tribal building, but it has also been successful with three new convenience stores, a new building for elders, and new community centers that have opened in White Earth.

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Gina Boudreau, Tribal Health Educator

Maintaining a Strong Community Coalition: The health education department has built a strong coalition of community members who support and guide their efforts. Ms. Boudreau and Ms. Anderson share their thoughts: “We wrote the policy and did the presentation to the tribe, but the coalition wrote letters of support. For the tobacco coalition, when we speak or take action we speak as a group.”

Sharing Strength Based Messages with the Community: The White Earth educators and coalition members worked hard to offer messages about norms that resonate with community values. For example, they emphasized the importance of role modeling, as community leaders and as adults for tribal youth. They encouraged community leaders to create a professional, healthy environment for tribal workers and community visitors. When the White Earth tribal building decision was made, the health educators created beautiful signage that didn’t just give a negative message about no smoking, but also shared a positive message reinforcing sacred use of tobacco.

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Strategies for CHANGE (continued)

Building Relationships. White Earth health educators spent time and effort building relationships with administrators and upper management. Such good relationships contributed to policy approval.

Sharing Community Data Back to the Community: White Earth advocates took the opportunity to collect data on the level of support the community members had for smoke-free environments. But the data didn't just sit on the shelf; they reflected the community opinions supporting smoke-free environments back to the Tribal Council as part of their slide show discussion on the policy.



Importance of the CHANGE

According to the US Preventive Task Force, creating 100% smoke-free environments is one the most effective strategies for reducing harm caused by commercial tobacco (www.thecommunityguide.org). Research shows that reducing secondhand smoke can *immediately decrease* the number of heart and asthma attacks in a community. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that hospitalizations in Pueblo, Colorado dropped 41 percent during a three-year period when smoking was banned, but there was no such drop in the other two areas studied that had no such ban. (CDC MMWR for January 2, 2009 / 57(51&52);1373-1377).

With American Indian people in Minnesota suffering very high death rates from heart disease, cancer, diabetes and lung disease, this is a critical step in protecting the future of the people (data available from Great Lakes Intertribal Council Epidemiology Center at www.glitc.org).

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Lessons Learned about creating CHANGE

- ❖ Community ownership of change and participation in change is critical in Native communities, where change has often been forced from the outside at great cost. "We learned the importance of framing policy in a positive light and emphasizing cultural values, such as respect, that are important to building a healthier future for Indian people."

- ❖ Encourage every coalition member to see themselves as change agents. Native people need to remind each other and encourage each other that "we do not need to be afraid -- change that draws on community strengths is part of restoration of what was lost."

- ❖ Being patient and persistent in the work can help coalitions create a strong reputation with community leaders, who will then see the coalition as an important partner in creating new policy and practice.

- ❖ Understand politics! Tribal officials are elected leaders so they are very sensitive to feedback from their constituents -- people who smoke can be quite vocal about losing their space. Anticipating this reaction can help you understand the setbacks

that might come with strict policy changes. In White Earth, the coalition wanted a completely smoke-free area, but smoking was ultimately allowed in the back of the lot. Despite this,

the coalition continued the pressure to have a strong smoke-free policy to encourage a norm of non-commercial use. As of 2009, people are respecting the new policy. Smoking is no longer seen anywhere near the tribal building or entrance.

Type of Change:	Formal Tribal Policy
Location of Change:	White Earth Reservation Tribal Center
Reach of Change:	500 tribal building employees & visitors
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