

## Leech Lake Organizes Local Tobacco Advisory Councils

### **The Community CHANGE**

People arrived at the Bena community center on the morning of March 7, 2011, from villages around the Leech Lake Nation. But the people weren't gathering for the usual powwow, not a sporting event or a community feast. Instead, they came for a two-day training in diverse community based tactics – tobacco policy, media, community organizing – tactics that would help them stop the harms to their people caused by commercial tobacco. Tribal Tobacco Education and Policy (TTEP) Coordinator Spencer Shotley welcomed them to an event that represented the fruits of two years of effort. Spencer had used knowledge of his own tribal community, and skills he had learned from training and technical assistance, to patiently and respectfully bring dozens of people from five villages into the work on tobacco issues at Leech Lake.

### **Process of creating CHANGE**

Leech Lake is a Nation of Ojibwe living around the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest lake in Minnesota. A majority of Leech Lake members smoke cigarettes, and this level of addiction is fueled by the availability and heavy marketing for cheap Seneca cigarettes. The people of Leech Lake reservation live in 14 villages, separated by distances of 20 to 80 miles. Each village elects members of their community to serve on Local Indian Councils (LICs) that work locally but also advise the Reservation Tribal Council.

To create coalitions to address the challenging task of tobacco, the TTEP coordinator built on the existing LIC infrastructure, as well as the foundation laid by Marcy Ardito, the previous tobacco staff, who'd worked for a decade on community education. The idea was to create Tobacco Advisory Councils (TACs) from each village to empower for policy and system change.

But the process did not happen quickly. As Spencer notes, "Be real respectful to your people and allow them time or whatever it takes to move things forward to work with you . . . and when you use that approach you're not out of place, not trying to tell the community to go pick blueberries in the

winter. All of the elders understand that, they've been through it. They told me several years ago, there's no hurry, there's a right time for everything. And we'll get there. So I think the non Native timetable placed on the Natives and then another Native tries to place it on another Native, I think that's part of that oppression because we don't live that way."



Youth Director Gary Charwood, and TTEP Coordinator Spencer Shotley at the tobacco booth at a local powwow.

The TTEP coordinator started out by going to monthly LIC meetings, and introducing himself and the project. An important element was to "read" the tone of the meeting. If frustration or tension was in the air, Spencer would respectfully ask to return at a future date. Targeting seven communities, widely spread apart geographically, was also a major challenge. Other factors took extra time and patience: understanding the negative effects of intergenerational trauma and addiction on peoples' ability to communicate and work together, and canceled or rescheduled meetings in tight-knit communities due to the sickness or death of a community member.

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Spencer Shotley, TTEP Coordinator

Drawing on the assets of the youth division was another key first step. Each Leech Lake community has a paid youth coordinator, who does prevention education including some on tobacco. The TTEP coordinator tapped this knowledgeable community resource to be a member on the TAC and also for ideas on who to recruit. This helped to get the right people involved.

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The TTEP coordinator then focused on bringing education to each community at the LIC meetings and booths at powwows. TTEP also supported a smoke-free “Drum and Dance” mini-powwow in each community with messaging on traditional tobacco and smoke-free living from a respected community leader. TTEP brought in Native experts in tobacco for training to provide information and skills directly to community members. In the early phase of TTEP, the coordinator took on most of the work, but by the end of 2010, five of seven TACS attended trainings or were organizing events.

### **Strategies for creating CHANGE**

The Leech Lake TTEP program used a variety of strategies to create change:

*Hold deep respect for the people’s past and present struggles.* So many things have happened, and still happen today, that are out of Native people’s control even when they live on their ancestral lands and retain sovereign power. The TTEP coordinator asked the LIC for permission to do this work. He shared an example of a village where a resort owner had built a dock on a swimming beach that had been used by Ojibwe for generations, yet the resort owner was adamant that the people could do nothing to stop him. Understanding this context is critical, especially when wanting to work on policy, where communities will resist change unless they can make their own decisions in an empowering environment where ideas and action are on their schedule and from within.



Theresa Jordan, Onigum LIC and TAC member with kinnikinnick for the powwow

*See the people as community assets with an important story to tell.* Theresa Jordan, long-time activist and member of the Onigum LIC and TAC, shares

her strategy: “Get the people together, gather them, feed them, let them know what you are planning on doing. Actually ask them for help, to do this or do that. [Learn from them], there are a lot of stories out

there, they are interesting, sad, moving, things like that, everyone has their own story.”

*Build relationships and empower others.* The TTEP coordinator built on LIC structure and relationships. He placed himself by sharing his Leech Lake clan and hometown. He also emphasized education so that people would be on the same level in terms of knowledge about commercial tobacco – sharing what he learned through trainings on the tobacco industry tactic of targeting communities. In turn, some communities took the lead on organizing their own mini-powwows, and learning more about their traditions. TACs have begun to gather stories about ceremonial tobacco. The use of kinnikinnick, from the red willow, was taught to TAC members, and for the first time ever, used in place of pipe tobacco at the opening ceremony of a statewide intertribal smoke-free powwow in April 2011 at Leech Lake.

### **Importance of the CHANGE**

Minnesota Native people suffer very high rates of tobacco related diseases ([glitc.org/epicenter](http://glitc.org/epicenter)). The National Cancer Institute and International Tobacco Control Movement recognize the centrality of community-based coalitions for tobacco control ([cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb](http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb)). Enacting clean indoor air policies and system changes to reduce tobacco access and increase cessation access are best practices that require community mobilization.

### **Lessons Learned about CHANGE**

*Build on the local structure.* Leech Lake TACs that have LIC members involved are the most active.

*Time and respect are needed to build community capacity for the long haul.* Think carefully about your community and take time to do things in the right way. Activity will wax and wane but keep coming back when individuals or communities stumble. Creating a space that allows painful dialogue without being destructive will help in the larger healing process for the people.

*Train and Empower.* Bring in Native experts to train and educate the people directly for this work. This will motivate and inspire them to see themselves as leaders to create healthy change.