



Opioid Misuse and Overdose Prevention in Native Communities

The opioid crisis is a fast-growing epidemic for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. Tribes are addressing the crisis using legal, medical, cultural, and preventive measures. This fact sheet presents up-to-date prevention practices being implemented in AI/AN communities across the nation. The purpose of this information is to help Native Connections grantees in planning to address opioid misuse in their communities, based on community needs and readiness levels.

Tribal Prevention Practices to Address Opioid Misuse

Beyond building awareness, tribes are taking steps to help their members address the many issues raised by opioid misuse. Below is a list of prevention practices, recommended by experts and tribal leaders, being used across the country in Native communities.¹

- **Institute overdose protection programs.** Raise community awareness on using life-saving drugs for opioid overdoses and for recovery from opioid addiction with involvement from medical providers, first responders, and law enforcement are effective strategies.²
- **Strengthen culture.** Methods for strengthening culture include a campaign to encourage participation in cultural activities, creating communal/community gathering spaces, promoting traditional foods with cooking and health education, and sponsoring sober community events and cultural ceremonies. Additionally, integrating ceremonies and language into everyday life strengthens culture, as do language immersion opportunities.
- **Reach youth early.** Research shows substance misuse rates for AI/AN youth are significantly higher than national averages. For example, binge drinking and OxyContin use among AI/AN youth start earlier than non-AI/AN youth.³ Given

¹ http://mn.gov/gov-stat/pdf/2017_03_09_Opioid_Summit_Report.pdf

² <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2016/10/17/battling-opioids-in-indian-country/>

³ Stanley, L., Harness, S., Swaim, R., Beauvais, F., Rates of Substance Use of American Indian Students in 8th, 10th, and 12 Grades Living on or Near Reservation: Update, 2009-2012, Public Health Reports, March-April 2014, V.129



these elevated risk factors, reaching AI/AN youth before eighth grade for prevention activities should be considered.⁴

- **Address chronic pain.** Availability of alternative pain management strategies and Chronic Pain Agreements helps moderate prescription drug use.⁵
- **Strengthen culture in educational settings.** Including cultural elements in school curriculums and afterschool programs is an effective strategy. Fostering better relationships between tribes and public schools may be necessary before these goals can be achieved. Programs such as youth mentoring and parent education through culture can also be developed via educational settings.
- **Improve access to culturally-based services.** Medical services providing chemical dependency, mental health, and suicide prevention assistance can add a cultural perspective to treatment. Traditional healers can be employed to reduce harm, promote health, and encourage self-care for practitioners.
- **Strengthen community leadership.** Focus on strengthening leadership through elder wisdom, youth experiences, pairing elders and youth, building community organizing skills, and celebrating and recognizing individual and community achievements and successes. Raising tribal leadership awareness of prevention efforts may help contribute to sustainability.
- **Collect specific data.** Tribes and other organizations should invest in data collection on prevention practices and outcomes, so leaders and decision-makers can access, analyze, and evaluate strengths and risks for programs and populations. Evaluation research on culturally-specific practices needs to occur so best practices can be established.
- **Address trauma in community.** Promote understanding of trauma-informed practices in agencies and tribal leadership. A guide for trauma-informed care can be found at <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4816/SMA14-4816.pdf>. Also, consider Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) when planning prevention practices. Additionally, understanding trauma and traumatic experiences can be incorporated in family and community education. More information about ACEs can be at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>.
- **Intentionally organize for change.** Convene summits around prevention that include stakeholders, government agencies, and community entities.⁶

⁴ National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2016. Access the full article at <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2014/09/substance-use-in-american-indian-youth-worse-than-we-thought>

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2016/09/responsibly-sensitively-addressing-chronic-pain-amid-opioid-crisis> 11/29/2017

⁶ http://mn.gov/gov-stat/pdf/2017_03_09_Opioid_Summit_Report.pdf