



# **SAMHSA**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

## **Opioid Misuse in Indian Country: A Guide for SAMHSA Grantees**

Tribal communities are drawing on their cultural strengths to fight a growing public health crisis in the United States and across Indian Country—opioid misuse. From 2002 to 2014, over half of the substance misuse-related deaths among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) were linked to opioids.<sup>1</sup> Misuse of opioids can also contribute to increased crime, family violence, child neglect, sexual abuse, and sex trafficking.<sup>2</sup> Misuse also contributes to challenges, and sometimes failure, in school or work. Many tribal families have suffered from the loss and trauma of a family member's fatal overdose.

AI/AN communities are tackling the challenging issues that result from opioid misuse in their communities. This fact sheet was developed for AI/AN communities and organizations. It provides a definition of opioids, an overview of how opioid dependency affects physical health, and AI/AN efforts to prevent opioid misuse in communities and villages.

### **What Are Opioids?**

**Opioids are a class of drugs commonly prescribed to treat pain.** Opioids are narcotics that dull the sense of pain and cause drowsiness by depressing the central nervous system. They should never be taken with other drugs that do the same (such as alcohol). Opioids include heroin, morphine, and prescription painkillers, such as Methadone, OxyContin, Vicodin, and Percocet. Opioids also refer to synthetic opioids, like Fentanyl, which is roughly 50 times more potent than morphine and about 10 times more potent than heroin.<sup>3</sup>

### **What We Know Today**

**Opioids attach to parts of the brain, central nervous system, and digestive tract.** They cause drowsiness and slow a person's breathing, which may heighten the risk of overdose.

**AI/ANs experience opioid addiction at a higher rate than other populations.**<sup>4</sup> The overuse of opioids creates new brain pathways, which causes a desire for more and creates withdrawal symptoms if the user suddenly stops using the narcotic drug.

**AI/AN women have one of the highest rates of death from prescription opioid overdose compared to all women in the United States.**<sup>5</sup> Deaths from prescription painkiller overdoses among women have increased more than 400% since 1999, compared to 265% among men.<sup>6</sup>

**More than 1 in 10 American Indian women have a diagnosis of opiate dependency or misuse during pregnancy.**<sup>7</sup> Babies born to mothers who misuse opioids during pregnancy are at risk of neonatal abstinence syndrome and often need special medical care.

### **AI/AN Leadership Response**

Leadership from tribes, Alaska Native corporations, AI/AN organizations, and urban Indian centers have stepped up to address the opioid epidemic. Using partnerships and mandates, below are some of the innovative approaches taken to help American Indian communities and Alaska Native villages regain health and wellness.

- **Alaska Native health organizations** partnered with the state of Alaska to form the Alaska Opioid Policy Task Force. The task force released recommendations to the governor and legislature that range from opioid prevention to recovery.
- **Tribal leaders from New Mexico pueblos** met with the U.S. Department of Justice to create an educational blitz about opioid misuse for American Indian children.
- **United South and Eastern Tribes** partnered with tribal epidemiology centers to host an Opioid and Substance Abuse Summit. The summit included discussions on historical trauma, the neuroscience of addiction, and strategies to address the opioid epidemic.
- **Tribal leaders in Minnesota** sponsored a Tribal-State Opioid Summit, where tribal and state leaders worked together to develop opioid prevention and treatment recommendations.



*This fact sheet was prepared for SAMHSA under contract number HHSS280201300001C with SAMHSA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, opinions, and content of this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of SAMHSA or HHS.*

www.samhsa.gov  
1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

Draft, March 2018

- **Blackfeet Nation and the Rocky Mountain Tribal Epidemiology Center** received funding from the Montana Healthcare Foundation to use cultural strengths and other approaches to address drug misuse among pregnant women on the Blackfeet Reservation.
- **Indian Health Service (IHS)** became the first federal agency to require training in opioid use disorders for all prescribing clinicians. More than 1,300 tribal health care providers have attended the courses.

## Approaches to Prevent Opioid Misuse

American Indian communities and Alaska Native villages use a range of approaches to prevent opioid misuse. These efforts educate and engage the broadest range of the community, including youth, family members, health care providers, police, schools, and other community services. Below is a list of efforts that can be effective for AI/AN communities.

- **Prevention activities:** Develop prevention activities that promote anti-drug messages grounded in cultural strengths and use traditional narratives and healing practices.
- **Education opportunities:** Educate community members, health care providers, community leaders, and youth on the opioid addiction process, how to avoid addiction, and how to reverse it.
- **Family and youth voices:** Guide American Indian community or Alaska Native village outreach and prevention efforts with family and youth perspectives.
- **Painkiller prescription monitoring:** Support local health clinics in their efforts to strengthen prescription drug monitoring programs.
- **Prescription drug disposal programs:** Spread the word about tribal police “take-back” programs for safe and anonymous ways to dispose of unwanted or expired opioid medications.

<sup>1</sup> 2016 USET Opioid and Substance Abuse Summit: <https://www.rmtlc.org/event/opioid-substance-abuse-summit/>

<sup>2</sup> National Indian Health Board. (2016). The Opioid Crisis in Indian Country. Retrieved from <https://www.nihb.org/docs/06162016/Opioid%20Crisis%20Part%20in%20Indian%20Country.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Vergano, D. (2017, October 12). Fentanyl is now the leading cause of U.S. overdose deaths. *Buzzfeed News*. [https://www.buzzfeed.com/danvergano/fentanyl-leading-overdoses?utm\\_term=.guG00A6gD#.upylO3804](https://www.buzzfeed.com/danvergano/fentanyl-leading-overdoses?utm_term=.guG00A6gD#.upylO3804)

<sup>4</sup> The White House Administration Office of National Drug Control Policy. (n.d.). *Collaborating with Native Americans and Alaskan Natives*. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/ondcp/native-americans-and-alaskan-indians>

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013, July). Prescription painkiller overdoses: a growing epidemic, especially among women. *CDC Vital Signs*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/prescriptionpainkilleroverdoses/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 4

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 2

\* This publication lists non-federal resources to provide additional information to consumers. The views and content in those resources have not been formally approved by HHS. Listing of the resources is not an endorsement by HHS or its components.

## Where to Begin

Communities that are ready to address their opioid misuse concerns can obtain information about opioid addiction and prevention efforts from pre-recorded trainings and other resources that are available at no cost through the internet, such as those listed in the Resources section of this document.

## Resources\*

**SAMHSA’s Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies** resources to support the prevention of opioid misuse and overdose:

<http://www.castri.org/CAPT-Resources-Opioids.pdf>

**The IHS Response to a National Crisis:**

[https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/includes/themes/newihstheme/display\\_objects/documents/2017\\_Speeches/OpiateEpidemic-AllTribesCall-2017-05.pdf](https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/includes/themes/newihstheme/display_objects/documents/2017_Speeches/OpiateEpidemic-AllTribesCall-2017-05.pdf)

**Alaska Opioid Policy Task Force recommendations:**

<http://www.dhss.alaska.gov/AKOpioidTaskForce/Documents/AOPTF-Recommendations-1-19-17.pdf>

**The National Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda:**

<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP16-NTBH-AGENDA>

**National Institute on Drug Abuse - Drug Facts: Lessons from Prevention Research:** <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/lessons-prevention-research>

**The 2016 Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health:** <https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov>

## How to Seek Help

Q&A from the National Institute on Drug Abuse offers help for young adults who think they have a problem with drugs and want to learn how to get help. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/treatment/what-to-do-if-you-have-problem-drugs-teens-young-adults>

Seeking help is a sign of strength. AI/AN tribes and urban organizations in your region offer opioid addiction treatment services for adults and youth. Contact your local health care office to learn more about how they can help.

## About the Tribal TTA Center

The Tribal TTA Center is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Tribal TTA Center uses a culturally relevant, holistic approach to deliver TTA on mental and substance use disorders, suicide prevention, and mental health promotion. TTA is offered to a broad audience of all tribal communities, a focused audience of SAMHSA tribal grantees, and an intensive audience of selected AI/AN tribes per year.

## For More Information

To request more information about the Tribal TTA Center or submit a technical assistance request, call (800) 953-1379 or visit <http://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac>.