

### Alaska

#### **Public Health Problem**

Rates of tobacco use, both cigarettes and smokeless products, have historically been higher in Alaska than in the rest of the nation, and these rates are especially pronounced among the Alaska Native population, which has a significantly higher rate of tobacco use than whites and other racial or ethnic groups in the state. Tobacco use costs the state more than \$148 million in lost productivity and more than \$132 million in health care costs annually.

#### **Program Example**

To address this health problem, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has implemented a comprehensive tobacco control program based upon CDC's *Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs—2007* guidance document. Program components include counter-marketing, community based programs, youth and school programs, eliminating exposure to secondhand smoke, eliminating health disparities, cessation, and evaluation. The program includes a free quit line for all Alaskans (1-888-842-QUIT) that includes individualized quit plans, personal quit coaches, and nicotine replacement therapy. Thousands of Alaskans have called the quitline since it was established in 2002, and a 2007 study documented a 40-percent quit rate. The program components have been implemented in partnership with the Alaska Tobacco Alliance, local tobacco prevention and control coalitions, nonprofit and Alaska Native partners and schools, with support from legislators and local governments who have supported tobacco use prevention efforts.

Alaska has seen progress as a result of its efforts. The most recent data from the Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), released in 2008, showed a significant reduction in tobacco use. The percentage of adult smokers in Alaska has declined by one-fifth since 1996 to 21.5 percent in 2007, a statistically significant decrease. This represents more than 27,000 fewer smokers and is expected to result in almost 8,000 fewer tobacco-related deaths and \$300 million in averted medical costs. The data indicate that smoking is declining among adults in most age groups and regions of the state. While smoking rates are still high among Alaska Native adults, they have dropped significantly among Alaska Native youth.

OSH played a role in the state's success by providing technical assistance and guidance that enabled the state to frame a message linking this decrease in prevalence to effective and well-funded comprehensive programs. OSH also provided extensive assistance to the Alaska program focused on the updated edition of *Best Practices*. As a result, not only did prevalence decrease, but the program and its partners were able to effectively educate policymakers on the health consequences of tobacco use and the need for additional funding. During the last legislative session, the state legislature approved an additional \$1 million for the program.

#### **Implications and Impact**

The statistically significant decrease in smoking rates demonstrates the effectiveness of Alaska's comprehensive program. Reducing tobacco use among the Alaska Native population has long been a serious public health challenge, and any progress toward reducing prevalence rates in this population is a clear and measurable accomplishment. The recent increase in the Alaska program's funding demonstrates the support in state government for tobacco control programs that are proven to be effective.

### Navajo Nation

#### **Public Health Problem**

Commercial tobacco-use prevalence is much higher among American Indian and Alaska Native populations than the U.S. population as a whole. As yet, unpublished data from the initial OSH-funded American Indian Adult Tobacco Survey suggest that rates range from 45 percent to more than 75 percent in some tribes. The implementation of evidenced-based strategies is needed to reduce the burden placed on this population. However, efforts to reduce commercial tobacco consumption must be implemented in a culturally sensitive manner to distinguish traditional and/or ceremonial use from commercial use.

#### **Program Example**

The Navajo Nation Council proposed the Navajo Nation Commercial Tobacco-Free Act of 2008 that included language prohibiting all commercial tobacco use to include cigarettes, pipes, cigars, and smokeless tobacco. The legislation would have made all “public places, places of employment, and shared public airspace within the Navajo Nation” 100% commercial tobacco-free. In July, the Tribal Council passed the legislation with none of the proposed amendments that would have weakened it (e.g., amendments that would have exempted casinos, resorts, sporting arenas, and/or golf courses). Ultimately, however, the legislation was vetoed by the Navajo Nation president, and a subsequent attempt to override the veto was unsuccessful.

Throughout this historic process, OSH played a significant role in bridging critical partnership gaps between key non-Indian tobacco partners (i.e., the Arizona State Tobacco Control Program, University of Arizona, American Cancer Society, Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights, and other community tobacco control advocates) and the Navajo Nation. Technical assistance that included evidenced-based science, health communication messaging, and the framework outlined in *Best Practices* was begun in 2005 and culminated in 2008 with a broad non-Indian and Navajo Indian collaboration that was successful in its first attempt at introducing and passing through the Tribal Council this first-ever legislation to restrict the access and consumption of commercial tobacco on Indian land.

Leaders at the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health indicate that OSH’s input helped to validate the partnerships that began to emerge between non-Indian groups and the Navajo Nation. The unequivocal confidence conveyed by OSH in the belief that the Navajo Nation could achieve the goals of the National Tobacco Control Program resulted in buy-in from the Navajo community at large and the submission of support letters from tribes and organizations.

#### **Implications and Impact**

The issue of commercial tobacco use among American Indians and Alaska Natives is a serious public health challenge, and any progress toward reducing its prevalence is an accomplishment. While the attempt to pass the aforementioned legislation ultimately failed, this effort represents a success nonetheless because it elevated the issue of commercial tobacco use to unprecedented levels in the Navajo Nation and potentially in Indian Country nationwide. Also, the newly forged partnerships that resulted produced a dynamic collaboration that heretofore had not occurred and is now poised to lead a second effort to restrict the access and consumption of commercial tobacco.