

Treading Softly: Working with American Indian Communities

Navigating within the enigmatic environment of a casino toward a smoke-free policy is often full of pitfalls and missteps. The path can become even more uncertain with the added layer of culture when working with a tribal casino.

What is the best way for an outsider to approach American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities? How can project staff develop a relationship with and gain the trust of tribal council members, casino management and other key decision makers? Answering these questions is an important first step in working with AI/AN communities, and addressing the health and tobacco disparities among this priority population.

Do Your Homework

According to Dr. Elizabeth Lara-O'Rourke, Project Director of the NATIVE Tobacco Project, "Each tribe is unique and it is important for people that work with tribes to be knowledgeable about the

traditional use of tobacco within that tribe and the prevalence of smoking among the AI/AN population. The higher the smoking prevalence, the more important the issue of secondhand smoke exposure is likely to be."



Some information can be obtained from a variety of sources such as the California Department of Public Health Tobacco Control Program (CTCP), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) and the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center (TCEC) handbook, *Evaluation in Context*.

With that basic understanding, the next step is to find a local insider who can provide insights about who makes the decisions regarding casino policies -- casino management or the tribal council -- because it varies from tribe to tribe. Finally, whether or not casino management or tribal council members smoke, and how best to approach them should also be determined. Having this information is vital to a project in defining and/or refining its intervention activities and evaluation strategies.

Angela Ramirez, Project Director of the Tobacco Education Project in Imperial County, said they got started by having the coalition complete the Midwest Academy Strategy Chart. "In addition to identifying what we wanted to achieve," Angela stated, "we were able to identify key



individuals that would be able to help us or guide us related to the two different tribes we were targeting." This led them to contact the Human Resources Department directly at one casino with an offer to do educational presentations. However, this approach was unsuccessful. With the other tribal casino, they found a partner through the tribe's drug and alcohol program who was "very open and responsive to providing a tobacco education group."



Conducting evaluation in a culturally competent manner includes recognizing key cultural characteristics. According to Angela, the AI/AN community is "modest and humble. For that reason, flashy clothes and jewelry can be intimidating."

Furthermore, tribal council members are elders in the AI/AN community and, as such, should be shown respect and deference. This means asking the tribal council if it has any concerns regarding secondhand smoke exposure and smoking-related illnesses among tribal members, rather than telling them what they should be doing within their tribal community.

Angela says it is also key "to be honest, to know your [facts and statistics regarding smoking prevalence among the AI/AN community] and to be confident," to establish credibility with the tribal council, casino management and tribal community members.

Be Transparent

Collecting evaluation-related data regarding smoke-free casino objectives can include face-to-face interviews, focus group conversations, and observations. However, evaluation activities, like intervention activities, must be seen as part of the relationship-building process. One of the most important aspects of approaching tribal communities, according to Melanie Ruvalcaba, Manager of the IMPACT Program in Fresno County, is to be transparent.

Although collecting observation data within the casino can be done covertly without the knowledge of the casino management or the tribal council, Melanie cautions about using this approach.

She explains, "Transparency is really important to building a relationship. If they think you are doing things behind their back, why would they want to work with you?" It's more important to ask, and possibly get turned down, rather than to conduct observations or gather community health data without their knowledge.



Interviewing casino staff without permission may jeopardize employee jobs. Since tribes are sovereign nations, casino employees are not protected by California workplace laws, but by federal laws. As a result, participating in key informant interviews or other data collection processes may be particularly risky for an employee if the approval of casino management or the tribal council has not been granted beforehand.

If gaining access to the tribal council or casino management proves difficult, Angela suggests tapping into the tribe's social service programs, child care centers, or drug and alcohol services by contacting the program directors directly. Tobacco control programs can start by offering cessation services and educational materials, such as secondhand smoke literature.

Angela also suggests that becoming part of the community by popping in regularly and participating in community activities, such as health fairs, is a way to demonstrate that you are sincere in helping the tribe better their environment and their community. This can lead to conducting evaluation activities which can tell you how well your message is reaching members of the tribal community.

A special thanks to the project directors who agreed to be interviewed for this article. Each summed up their work on smoke-free casino objectives similarly: be patient, take tiny steps and recognize those tiny steps as successes, whether or not you achieve the objective you set.

For more information on tobacco control evaluation in American Indian communities, please see the TCEC [Culture in Evaluation #3](#).