



Florence County Health Department

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NEWS RELEASE

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Tribal health advocates work to prevent a generation of addiction by highlighting the differences between commercial and traditional tobacco

(Florence, WI) – November is Native American Heritage Month, which provides an opportunity to celebrate the heritage, culture, and contributions of America’s First Peoples. Native Americans have persevered through centuries of discriminatory policies to make countless important contributions to society. Despite this, one enduring threat they face is the harm caused by commercial tobacco like cigarettes, chew, and other products.

A combination of tobacco industry targeting and policies that marginalized Native communities have driven high tobacco use rates among Native Americans in Wisconsin for years. Data from the 2020 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) shows that around a third of Native American adults report regularly smoking conventional cigarettes.

“The tobacco industry’s strategy of relentless marketing and the use of Native American imagery has paid off, resulting in Native people having a higher burden of tobacco-related disease and death” said Ann Price, Public Health Nurse. “One way to fight back is by reclaiming those traditions that the tobacco industry has sullied – including the sacred use of tobacco.”

Mrs. Price noted that the BRFSS data only covers the use of commercial tobacco products that are smoked, such as cigarettes and cigars -- and not the traditional tobacco historically used in Native American culture. Unlike traditional tobacco, commercial tobacco products like cigarettes are addictive and cause serious health harms, including cancer, lung and heart disease and diabetic complications.

Meanwhile, traditional tobacco use is considered sacred in Native American cultures, and is used as a medicine to promote physical, spiritual, emotional and community well-being. Also, when a tribal member presents traditional tobacco as a gift, it is considered a form of respect, especially when offered to another tribal member when asking for help, guidance, or protection. Wisconsin’s Native American

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health advocates are educating others on the importance of traditional tobacco, as well as the ways the tobacco industry co-opts Native American iconography and customs to get Native youth hooked on their deadly products.

Native people have one of the highest use rates of commercial tobacco use. One of the ways that native individuals educate youth about the protective factors of traditional tobacco use is to take out them out “harvesting.” Elders can then help youth is to involve kids first and teach them why and how traditional tobacco is used in a good way for healing and medicine thereby decreasing the use of harmful commercial tobacco (Twin Cities PBS, 2012).

To learn more about tribal efforts to prevent commercial tobacco use, visit KeptItSacred.org or follow the Wisconsin Native American Tobacco Network on Facebook. Native Americans looking for free, culturally-tailored help to quit commercial tobacco can call the American Indian Quit Line at 1-888-7AI-QUIT. For more on tobacco prevention efforts in Florence County visit www.florencewipublichealth.com or follow-us on Facebook @FlorenceCountyHealthDept

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