



## Convening Elders: American Indian Tobacco and Culture



from left to right: (Lori Newbreast, Betty Cooper, John Poupart, Herb Sam, John Morrin, Feron Jackson, Willy Malebear, George Earth, Daanis Chosa, Valerie LaFave, Lavon Lee, Norby Blake, Kris Rhodes, Melanie Plucinski)

The American Indian Cancer Foundation hosted a Convening of Elders on American Indian Tobacco and Culture on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Fifteen participants shared stories on traditional tobacco use, the harms that commercial tobacco imposes on our people, and how to engage youth around traditional tobacco knowledge. AICAF staff were honored to share in the conversations and to listen to the words of our elders. Moving forward we are guided in our work by what was shared with us. We will incorporate the teachings into future projects and “next steps.” This report reflects what we heard that day, highlighting priorities that will help shape future AICAF goals, projects and activities.



Traditional/Tribal Tobacco Ways: What does this mean to you?  
How did you learn?

How do we support our people in knowing and living our  
Tribal Tobacco ways?

What do we want our children/grandchildren to know about  
Tribal Tobacco ways and how do we teach them?

**“For Indian communities to acquire knowledge about Indian tobacco, and to give such knowledge the respect it deserves may be one of the greatest initiatives that Indians have in curbing the disproportional smoking rates.”**



## **How did we Arrive at this Point?**

The three questions on the previous page were merely suggested questions as a start for this gathering. The issue regarding the meaning and purpose of traditional Indian tobacco arose in the Indian community only a few years ago. Long before American Indians had begun to use commercial tobacco they had only traditional Indian tobacco (which was native to this land) for personal use and in ceremonies. There is no documented source to describe the transition or to satisfactorily explain why this change came about.

In 2013 the Tribal Tobacco Use Project assessed the rate of smoking among the Indian population and found a current adult smoking prevalence among American Indian adults to be almost 60%, which is more than three times the statewide smoking rate. The issue of traditional Indian tobacco was included in this study. It was determined, however that the Indian community needed to begin internal community discussions before non-Indians wrote about the findings or even on the subject. This gathering of elders is to make sure that findings on this subject would be interpreted and shared from the perspective of the American Indian lived experience.

As we discussed the importance of sharing traditional tobacco knowledge and ways with younger generations, intergenerational cultural knowledge transmission was a key part of this discussion. There has been concern that young American Indian people have drifted away from the culture and are losing contact with American Indian elders, the keepers of traditional Indian knowledge.

## **Historical Context for Loss of Traditional Indian Cultural Knowledge**

For more than one hundred years federal policies have tried to terminate the unique legal/political government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the U.S. government. These moves had a negative impact on Indians and destroyed communities and familial bonds. When American Indian children were separated from their families during the boarding school era, they were deprived of our teachings and our traditional ways of knowing. Children taken from the reservation at a young age and sent to a Christian institution or orphanage lost some or all of the sense of self that is connected to Indian culture and tradition. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Indians were ostracized and traditional ways were devalued due to public policy and procedures within social institutions. As a result, Indian ceremonies, which included the use of Indian tobacco, were conducted in secret and



native language was spoken only in homes or private places. Traditional tobacco knowledge was not necessarily passed to the next generation. The generation that was born from parents who attended boarding school were then less likely to be introduced to traditional Indian tobacco and didn't know the difference between this and harmful commercial tobacco. In recent generations, American Indian people have revitalized ceremonial beliefs and practices and yet it seems there may be a disconnect with commercial tobacco commonly being used in our ceremonial ways given the lack of access to traditional tobacco products.

### **Addiction**

Trauma in American Indian communities is evident in both historical and current contexts for American Indian people. The trauma is evident in many forms of violence and as a result, we as Indian people succumb to addiction at rates that far outnumber the general population. We have enormous challenges around healing our spirits from historical trauma and from resulting addictions that often lead to additional trauma. When a person is addicted to a substance, such as commercial tobacco, the substance itself loses all spiritual value.

Many personal stories were shared on family members and friends who suffered or are suffering the burden of tobacco addiction, cancer, diabetes and other debilitating health conditions. Several Elders spoke about their own journeys with health, with illness and with recovery. One person shared his story about being ill and visiting a Medicine Man who told him that his illness would grow and spread throughout his body if he did not change his health habits and stop smoking. Several Elders learned about smoking related harms and how addictive smoking is from mainstream news. The elders agreed that American Indian smokers need more support to quit smoking. AICAF honors all of the stories that were shared at the convening and carry them with us into our work around tobacco and health promotion.



## Engaging American Indian Youth

“If we expect our younger Indians to acquire knowledge about our traditional ways, then we as elders must provide opportunities for that to happen. The old Indian way of learning whereby the “learner” had an obligation to listen, watch; and then repeat or do what he or she observed was the historic and cultural way of learning.” Over the years learning styles have changed due to many social factors. American Indian young people are expected to learn from their elders and to ask what they want to know. Present day society has changed the culture around learning of our traditions. Elders want to share knowledge with young people and are looking for effective ways of engaging them. Opportunities for elders to reach American Indian students in schools is one way to help them to identify who they are and provide support, mentorship and to let them know they are not alone. American Indian elders can connect with Indian students attending college away from their home communities with support, cultural activities and community activities. Youth are also in need of strong, positive role models and traditional ways of learning as well as ceremonial and healing ways. Elders need to lead by example and also teach traditional tobacco knowledge and ways to young people of all ages; no one is too young or too old. The aim is to look to youth to come up with practical, meaningful solutions to prevent peers from using commercial tobacco and to encourage their positive leadership. Talking circles with elders and youth would present an opportunity for sharing teachings. It is suggested that youth can observe and document future conversations, and all of the stories and teachings within to both gain traditional knowledge and contribute their valuable skills in sharing this knowledge with others. In this way, young Indian people experience the traditional method of “learning” without being required to use contemporary “teaching” methods. Preserving and/or revitalizing the traditional Indian ways

## Guiding Principles for Us

We as Indian people must have bravery, honesty and generosity; then we will have wisdom. We have a slower culture and our culture tells us to teach in a loving way, not a punishing way. This is how we need to educate youth on traditional tobacco. American Indian people are a resilient people who have endured and survived everything that has come to us thus far. In order to thrive we have to come back to our traditional ways. **We are not looking to programs to “fix” us. Our strongest assets are our spirituality, our healing powers, culture, and family systems.**



## Next Steps

- Engage youth to generate ideas and plans for learning about traditional tobacco.
- Present to tribal leadership throughout Minnesota and invite partnership around prevention and healing approaches based on tribal teachings, sovereignty, and self-determination.
- Develop and promote culturally specific smoking cessation materials for American Indians.
- Host a meeting on traditional tobacco protocols.
- Continue to host talking circles and invite community conversation.
- Develop a data center that contains relevant information about tobacco use among American Indians.