

***The Circle begins its look at tobacco use in Minnesota  
Native communities***  
***by Eli Johnson***

Asemaa. Cansasa. Tobacco. For Native nations in Minnesota and elsewhere, it has long been one of our most powerful and sacred medicines. And yet, ironically, tobacco has turned from a medicine to a poison for many who use it.

An anonymous older Native woman stands outside Rainbow foods at dusk, purse over her shoulder, taking a long drag from her cigarette, eyes looking beyond the solitary influx of weekend shoppers to the farthest point along the street.

A middle-aged couple walks through the automatic doors pushing a cart of groceries. The man glances at her, grins in a friendly-to-strangers way, and in passing offers the eternal wisdom, "You know, those things'll kill ya." The woman doesn't move her eyes.

"I know," she says, "I know."

As a nation we've long been aware on a close personal level of the serious health consequences of smoking. According to the American Indian Community Tobacco Project, in Minnesota nowhere is this as true as among American Indians; 62% of us smoke, as compared to 18% of the general population, giving Natives in Minnesota the dubious honor of the highest rates of both smoking and smoking-related illness. Further, American Indians in Minnesota have smoking rates far higher than American Indians nationally.

And yet knowledge alone is not enough to solve this disparity. To assume that what we lack as a community is enough people saying "those things'll kill ya," is to adopt a patronizing, high-horse mentality that lays all the blame on the smoker, and may even obscure the true nature of the problem.

According to Sharon Day, Executive director of the Indigenous People's Task Force, which oversees the Minnesota Native American Council on Tobacco (MNACT), our skewed relationship with tobacco as a community extends back to the banning of Native religious practices in the 19th century.

"Of course we never want to say people don't have the right [to smoke], you know, that's what the government did to us for about 100 years," said Day. "They forbid us; they passed a federal law that with penalties said we couldn't use tobacco. But yet tobacco is a gift to us that we're to use in a sacred way. What we're really trying to do is promote traditional use of tobacco and also reduce the dependency that we have on commercial tobacco."

*The Circle* is beginning a seven-part series on tobacco in Indian Country, entitled the Sacred Tobacco Campaign. The purpose of this series is to shed light on issues surrounding tobacco and the tribes, as well as to promote better health in Native communities through lessening addictive tobacco use among Natives. *The Circle* will be covering culturally-specific smoking cessation programs, and tobacco-related education from the standpoint of Minnesota American Indian communities. Ceremonial use of tobacco, and cultivation of natural tobacco will also be covered.

According to Day, all these efforts provide a cumulative benefit to the community when they happen together.

“You can’t tell people to quit smoking if you don’t provide some resources for them to quit smoking, and on the other hand, we know from history what’s been done other places is that people quit smoking when policies have changed,” Day said

There are many Native organizations and programs in Minnesota with the mission of promoting healthy tobacco use among Natives. As part of the series, *The Circle* will highlight organizations such as these as resources to be utilized.

MNACT is focused on community training, media advocacy, and policy change, as well as promoting cultural quitting programs and growing natural tobacco for ceremonial use. MNACT also works as an intermediary between other more locally-based programs.

Another organization that is promoting healthy tobacco use is Healthy Nations, based in the Minneapolis American Indian Center, which conducts tobacco abuse prevention efforts and treatment programs.

Ain Dah Yung, a Native youth shelter located in St. Paul, offers similar services for youth.

Three of the Minnesota Ojibwe reservations – Fond du Lac, White Earth, and Leech Lake – offer services through the Indian Health Services clinics, allowing Native smokers readily available access to quitting options. Additionally, Mille Lacs runs a quarterly cultural retreat with the same goal of ending tobacco addiction.

These programs are part of a dialogue that is taking place on our reservations and in our neighborhoods regarding healthy living and tobacco use. In that spirit, *The Circle* invites our readers to voice their comments and experiences regarding this series. We hope to pose

questions about tobacco use that will be discussed and answered within our Native communities, as we move from rational knowledge to communal wisdom.

Comments can be submitted online at [www.thecirclenews.org](http://www.thecirclenews.org), or sent to *The Circle*, PO Box 6026, Minneapolis, MN 55406.

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