



# **TOBACCO:** **OUR ELDERS SPEAK**

**Elder Tobacco Talking Circles  
American Indian Community Tobacco Project**





# Tobacco: Our Elders Speak

## ELDER TOBACCO TALKING CIRCLES AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY TOBACCO PROJECT



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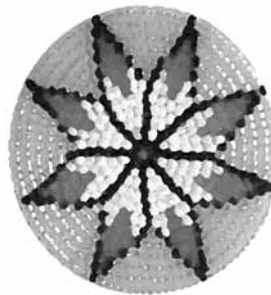
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*A special thank you to the elders that participated in the talking circles. Your stories and thoughts are the heart and soul of this report. Chi Miigwetch! Pidamiaya!*





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of asking American Indian elders to share their perspectives on tobacco use and abuse in a series of talking circles. The elders are keepers of the history and wisdom; and they are sought out for guidance, legends, and other cultural information. It is customary to first consult the elders on any issues of importance to the American Indian community.

These elders discussed how tobacco has always been a part of life for Native peoples. Tobacco is one of the original sacred medicines for American Indian people in Minnesota. The elders in the talking circles also shared personal stories of tobacco addiction and the difficult recovery process. The elders had plenty to say about how to prevent tobacco addiction among young people. According to the elders, everyone can and should do more to discourage cigarette smoking among young people.

### **Elders' recommendations for reducing tobacco abuse in Indian Country:**

*Parents and guardians of children and teens should:*

- Lead by example: do not smoke around children;
- Talk to kids about the risks while they are young and keep talking as they grow;
- Involve children in sports or other activities;
- Make rules about not smoking in the house; and
- Model and teach children about traditional use of and respect for tobacco.

*Support efforts to change policies and systems that encourage smoking;*

- community buildings and events smoke-free,
- ban tobacco company advertising, smoking in the movies and on TV,
- ban American Indian images on cigarettes,
- urge officials to dedicate a portion of tribal tobacco revenue to tobacco addiction prevention and recovery efforts.

*Community-wide efforts:*

- Educate so that everyone knows the dangers of cigarette smoking, and the traditional teachings about appropriate use through presentations, storytelling and skits to youth in schools, youth programs and at community events;
- Provide better cessation help for Indians that want to quit
- Involve everyone in some part of the process of gathering, growing, or sharing traditional tobacco as a means of reducing the use of commercial tobacco in Indian Country.

In reflecting on the conversations that took place in these talking circles, it is clear that many important issues, including tobacco, are on the minds of the elders. Several cultural values were clear in these discussions: concern for the children and future generations, non-interference, teaching by example, reaching community-wide with efforts, remembering and sharing the teachings from the elders for future generations.



## BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY TOBACCO PROJECT



The American Indian Community Tobacco Project (AICTP) is funded by the Minnesota Partnership for Action Against Tobacco. The AICTP is a unique partnership between the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health, the American Indian Policy Center and members of the Twin Cities American Indian community. It is the intention of the AICTP to expand the knowledge base about the many types of tobacco use in the urban American Indian community.

**The AICTP mission statement is:** *"To determine, as a group, what we need to know, how we can learn it, and how to use what we learn to reduce tobacco abuse among young, urban American Indian people."*

**The steering council of the AITCP is gathering knowledge to answer to the following questions:**

- Why are Indian teens and adults addicted to cigarettes more than any other group?
- Why do Indians in Minnesota smoke more than Indians in other parts of the country?
- How can our cultural values and traditional strengths be used to overcome tobacco misuse?

This report is the second in a series of five reports based on the work of the AICTP. Future reports will be written and published based on the research conducted on urban American Indian tobacco use and abuse. The third report, a compilation of the results of interviews with urban American Indian adults is expected in early 2006. The fourth report, expected in late 2006, will be the results from the Native Youth Tobacco Survey, a survey created for and administered to urban American Indian teens. The AICTP will piece together information presented in the first four reports in the final report, expected spring 2007.

## HOW AND WHY THIS INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED

Elders play a significant role in American Indian society. Elders are those individuals within the American Indian community who have gained wisdom from many years of experience and observation. In addition, elders retaining traditional beliefs, customs and practices are often identified as spiritual leaders. American Indian cultural and spiritual values are passed from generation to generation through oral traditions. The history of American Indian people is oral; nothing was ever written or recorded. For this reason, the elders are keepers of the history and wisdom; they are sought out for guidance, legends, and other cultural information. It is customary to first consult the elders on any issues of importance to the American Indian community.

The AICTP began our quest for knowledge by first approaching the community's elders. In 2003, we conducted 50 interviews with community elders. While these interviews provided some insight into the views of the community's elders, it was determined that it would be more helpful to utilize talking circles as a means of bringing together American Indian elders to discuss tobacco as a group.

In 2004, the AICTP Steering Council invited elders to the talking circles. The talking circles were held in two urban settings (Minneapolis and Saint Paul) and on two Minnesota tribal reservations (one Dakota and one Anishinaabe). The talking circles included both men and women; smokers and nonsmokers. Elders were given a gift of Indian tobacco, a meal and a cash incentive.

The talking circles were organized and introduced by a familiar community elder. Informed consent was reviewed and secured with each elder individually. Two AICTP staff were present at each talking circle to manage the details of note-taking and audiotape recording equipment. Everyone present was American Indian. Each talking circle was 1 – 2 hours in length.

The tapes and notes were transcribed, coded and analyzed using standard qualitative data analysis techniques. Three members of the AICTP read through all talking circle transcripts and prepared summaries of each talking circle. All members of the AICTP steering council reviewed the summaries and identified highlights, quotes and recommendations from the elders.

Once a summary was put together, another talking circle was scheduled with the elders. They were provided with a copy of the draft report. Staff read through each section and invited discussion at the end of each section. An overall discussion of the summary also occurred at the conclusion. The elders in this talking circle gave their consent that these statements accurately reflected their thoughts on the subject. They also provided AICTP staff with ideas on how to put this information to use in the Indian community.



## TOBACCO – TRADITIONAL USE CAN HEAL INDIAN PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The elders in the talking circles spoke of tobacco as a sacred gift from the Creator. Tobacco is used to communicate with the Creator and is used to show respect to the many spirits and other people. It may be important to note that tribes differ in their use of tobacco. The traditional use of tobacco as described in this report refers to tobacco use among the Anishinaabe/Ojibwe, Dakota, Lakota and other tribes in the Midwestern United States.

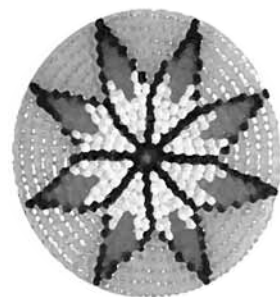
Traditional tobacco use is as common among American Indian elders living in urban areas as those living on the reservation. There are some American Indian elders, in both urban and reservation communities, who have retained the knowledge and practices of traditional tobacco use. In addition, there are American Indian elders in both places who do not use tobacco for traditional reasons.

Traditional tobacco use encompasses tobacco use for spiritual, traditional, ceremonial and cultural purposes among American Indian people. Some people use tobacco in this way several times a day, while others use it only on special occasions. There are many different ways to use tobacco traditionally. Burning tobacco in a pipe is one way. When a pipe is smoked, the smoke rises and carries the prayers to the Creator. Burning the tobacco in a dish, shell or fire also allows the smoke and prayers to rise to the Creator. Tobacco can also be offered as a gift to the Creator and the spirits by placing it on the ground by a tree or in the water. Tobacco can be offered to another person when you are making a spiritual request. As one elder so eloquently described it: *“Tobacco is a language.”*

There has been a shift in how tobacco was used “back then” and how it is used today. Stories of tobacco use “back then” often spoke of grandmothers or grandfathers smoking the pipe early in the morning or late at night. There are also stories of the old men smoking a pipe in ceremony. Cornhusks are sometimes used to wrap the tobacco for certain ceremonies. Elders spoke of how cigarettes later became a substitute for traditional tobacco use and are now a common part of traditional funerals and wakes.

Elders commonly reported learning the traditional uses of tobacco by watching their grandparents. They also reported a disconnect from traditions and culture while they were

*When you are hurting, you can use that tobacco  
to pray and ask the Creator for help. If you turn  
to cigarettes, it will hurt you later.”*







growing up. This disconnect was attributed to policies such as mandatory boarding school and urban relocation. For many, this was followed by addiction to tobacco and alcohol. Many elders spoke of a re-connection to culture and traditions in later adulthood with the end of the addictions.

In this series we will discuss tobacco in two general forms: commercial tobacco and traditional tobacco. Commercial tobacco is the tobacco that can be bought in a store or smoke shop in cans, pouches, tins, cigars or cigarettes. It has usually been processed with chemicals. Traditional tobacco is often unprocessed, chemically unaltered and includes kinnickinick, red willow, and Indian tobacco. Kinnickinick is a mixture of red willow bark with other important plants, roots and barks. Some individuals just use pure red willow bark. Indian tobacco is a form of tobacco that has been grown from seeds that have been cultivated year after year and cared for in a sacred way. There are different opinions among the elders about which tobacco should be used. One elder said, *“The Creator will listen to any tobacco – it is all the same.”* Another elder said, *“Today people have gotten lazy and buy their tobacco from the store – it’s not the same. Go out and pick the red willow for kinnickinick. Grow and care for the fragile ah-say-mah plants.”*

Some elders still plant and grow Indian tobacco or make kinnickinick. Gathering the bark and plants necessary to make kinnickinick or tending to fragile tobacco plants is hard work so only a few elders continue to practice this tradition. The few elders that continue these traditions provide tobacco or kinnickinick to their family and friends. Elders sometimes



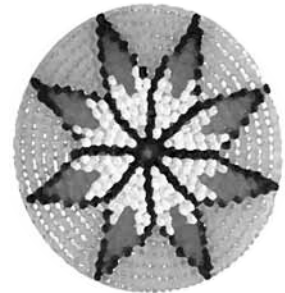


involve young people in the activities surrounding tobacco growing, but they are clear that growing tobacco is the responsibility of elders. *"The grandmothers and grandfathers are to grow the tobacco. It takes a lot. You really have to put your life into it. You really have to involve yourself and take care of it. Talk to it in the morning. Make sure it has the right amount of water. Make sure nothing can harm it and when it comes time to start harvesting it, we have to watch it close as it matures and the leaves grow. After we harvest it, it is taken care of and put away. We give it to other people that need the tobacco. Sometimes people came over and traded something for the tobacco. A young woman (who has not gone through menopause) and her husband are not allowed to grow the tobacco."*

Elders want people to understand that the power of tobacco is vital to our spiritual health, yet it has the potential to damage our physical health if used improperly. Many elders want to keep young people connected to traditional tobacco use so they don't have to experience the struggles of addiction. Elders talked about promoting the sacred use of tobacco as a way to help our people in many ways. One elder offered, *"The spirits could help the hurting that is inside when people turn to cigarettes. If young people prayed with the tobacco, they would feel better and not need to rely on smoking to feel better."* Likewise, another elder suggested, *"When you are hurting, you can use that tobacco to pray and ask the Creator for help. If you turn to cigarettes, it will hurt you later."*

There many different ways and reasons to use tobacco. American Indian people, especially the young ones, need to learn those reasons and ways to use tobacco. As one elder instructed, American Indian people must *"Get to know that tobacco."*

*"Today people have gotten lazy and buy their tobacco from the store - it's not the same. Go out and pick the red willow for kinnickinick. Grow and care for the fragile ah-say-mah plants."*



## TOBACCO – COMMERCIAL USE IS A THREAT TO INDIAN PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES



While tobacco has incredible healing power, that power will destroy individuals, families and communities when it is misused. Elders spoke of cigarette smoking as an addiction that is stronger than any other addiction. Most of the elders struggled with a tobacco addiction at some point in their lives. They all started as young people, most as a result of peer pressure or a desire to be “grown” like the adults in their lives. Many elders shared stories of how they recognized tobacco addiction as a problem somewhere along the way.

Quitting is described as an individual decision. *“It is up to each person to quit, do it when they are ready.”* Many elders say they quit because of the health problems that resulted from years of smoking. Sometimes, witnessing the health problems of suffering family members provided motivation to quit. In each group, elders shared their personal cessation experiences. In every talking circle, more than one elder spoke the following: *“Quitting was the hardest thing I ever did.”* Another common theme in these stories is that it took several tries before they were able to quit for good.

Elders recognized the dangers of cigarette smoking. They spoke of many family and friends that had passed on too soon because of illnesses that resulted from smoking. They spoke of their own smoking-related health problems. They are concerned about their children and grandchildren smoking and what they will experience as a result.



## ELDERS' RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE TOBACCO ADDICTION IN THE AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

The elders in the talking circles discussed personal stories of tobacco addiction. Breaking this addiction was described as the most difficult challenge of their lives.

According to the elders, everyone can and should do more to discourage cigarette smoking among young people. Some elders spoke of not having the influence to stop young people from smoking, *"We are powerless to prevent smoking"* and *"Kids need to make their own choices."* While these statements are consistent with the American Indian cultural value of non-interference, there is a struggle between the desire to let kids learn life's lessons with their personal experiences of the difficulty associated with overcoming tobacco addiction. Despite this struggle, most of the talking circle discussions focused on the following recommendations to decrease tobacco addiction among young people.

### **Encourage parents to lead by example**

Kids do what they see others do. As one elder put it, *"Adults pass on traditions to the next generation, both good and bad – tobacco use is one example."* Parents have a responsibility to *"lead by example"* by not smoking around their children, setting and sticking to rules about not smoking in the house and car, and talking to them while they are young and as they get older about the dangers of smoking cigarettes. Some elders suggested that children be involved in sports or other activities. Parents have the main responsibility to model and teach their children about traditional use of and respect for tobacco as a way to discourage cigarette smoking.

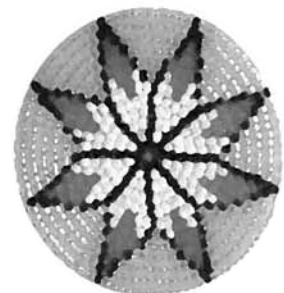
### **Develop community-wide education**

Community-wide education is necessary so that everyone knows the dangers of cigarette smoking. This includes presentations to youth in schools, youth programs and at community events. We need visual information to get the attention of people of all ages through storytelling, and skits by young people. It is important that messages get the attention of Indians.

### **Create smoke-free areas in community buildings, worksites and events**

Smoke-free rules make it more difficult for people to smoke at work and in the home. Elders reported how they cut down or quit smoking when they weren't allowed to smoke at work. Many elders spoke of how proud they are when their children don't allow smoking in the house; their grandchildren seem healthier as a result.

*"Our kids need to see  
other Indians not smoking"*





### **Change attitudes about American Indians and smoking**

The American Indian community has made great strides in reducing the image of “drunk Indians” by making policies that discourage alcohol use at social events such as powwows, community events, and conferences. Some elders suggest we approach tobacco abuse in the same way we have approached alcohol abuse. With more than half of American Indian teens and adults addicted to cigarettes, there is social pressure for young people to start and continue smoking as a way of identify with the adults in their community. *“Our kids need to see other Indians not smoking.”* We need to make NOT smoking “the thing to do.” Unfortunately smoking has always been viewed as cool and peer pressure is still an issue for young people. Elders recognize that although things have changed some, the media continues to glamorize smoking in the movies, on TV and in magazines.

### **Support and develop better policies for Indian people**

Some policies and systems that encouraged smoking when the elders were young have changed. Historically, some government boarding schools, the military and correctional facilities provided Indian youth with cigarettes. There is still work to do in regards to media directed at all youth through smoking in the movies and on television. Of particular interest are changing the American Indian images on several brands of cigarettes. Also, cigarettes are sold cheaper in smoke shops on the reservation. Many tribes rely on the revenue from tobacco sales. Some tribes have dedicated a portion of the tobacco revenue to local tobacco addiction education, prevention or recovery efforts.

### **Develop better cessation assistance for Indian people**

There is a need for better cessation help for those that want to quit by developing and using cessation programs that were designed with Indians in mind. Some people need to use medications but may not be able afford them. Traditional use would be a part of the program. Talking circles would be an important support piece. As one elder, who is trying to quit shared, *“Talking together like this could help people who want to quit.”*

### **Use traditional teachings to share and model good use**

The sharing of traditional teachings about tobacco needs to happen community-wide: at schools, youth programs, community events and in the home. Many elders are willing to talk to Indian youth about tobacco but are rarely asked to do so. *“There are different kinds of tobacco and you can use it for many things. Talk to the elders you know, or look for elders and ask questions about how to use tobacco.”*

### **Get involved with traditional tobacco**

Young people can’t take on the responsibility of growing tobacco, but they can help the elders who have taken on this responsibility. In Saint Paul a group of elders planted a tobacco garden this year with the support of a group of people in the community. This has been a new experience for many of the elders. They have enjoyed the responsibility and are looking forward to the first harvest and feast.





## FINAL THOUGHTS TO THE READER

Members of the American Indian community have been asking why the elders have been silent about issues of great importance to the community. Reflecting on the conversations that took place in these talking circles, it is clear that many important issues, including the abuse of tobacco, are on the minds of our elders. In *Mitakuye Oyasmin, We are All Related*, author A.C. Ross wonders why he has not heard the traditional stories from the elders. In that book, the elders said it is because they haven't been asked. Many of the elders who participated in the talking circles had not been asked to share their thoughts about tobacco. In asking them that broad question, we found this group of smokers and non-smokers was able to disentangle the tobacco stories of the past with current times for the benefit of all American Indian people now and in future generations.

As you read in these pages, our elders think it is possible to prevent young American Indian people from smoking. In fact, they believe we all can and should do more to discourage cigarette smoking and the resulting tobacco addiction among our young American Indian people. Some elders spoke of not having the influence to stop young people from smoking. While this is consistent with the American Indian cultural value of non-interference, it must be balanced with what is known about the difficulty associated with overcoming tobacco addiction. The discussions focused on many ideas to decrease tobacco addiction among young people. American Indian cultural values came out in these discussions: concern for the children and the next generation, non-interference, learning by doing, focusing efforts community-wide, and applying lessons learned in similar situations. By using these values, and the teachings of tobacco we can encourage people to use tobacco as the medicine it was intended to be.

The AICTP will continue to gather American Indian wisdom to address the misuse of tobacco in American Indian communities. Our plans to gather more information include interviews and talking circles with adults and surveys and talking circles with youth. This information will contribute to a better understanding of the tobacco related thoughts and behaviors of the urban Indian community in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

Beyond collecting more information, the AICTP plans to pass along what we learn to people and organizations that can use it to make progress in addressing tobacco abuse and addiction. These people include professionals in public health, medicine, youth development, education, and most importantly, individuals who want to change their own or their family's relationship with tobacco. In addition to gathering and reporting information, the AICTP will work with other community organizations to plan annual community events and place information in the media to highlight the unique relationship American Indian people have with tobacco.

We asked, and the elders spoke. Now will we listen and do our part to prevent tobacco addiction among future generations?





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