

Blackfeet Indian Country Addresses Opioid Epidemic

On June 29, 2016, over ninety public health experts and area stakeholders banded together at the “Therapies for Opioid Dependent Pregnant Women” conference in Browning, Montana, to discuss the overwhelming use of opioids amongst pregnant women.

Dr. Gray of Blackfeet Community Hospital, shared that in 2014, over 50% of babies born in Browning were drug-affected. This statistic has risen at an alarming rate over the past six years and there is no sign of the issue resolving on its own. Several out-of-town guest speakers shared how their communities have successfully addressed this issue. Amongst them was Dr. Adam Kartman of the Lummi Healing Spirit Opioid Treatment Program in Washington. The Lummi Healing Spirit offers medication assisted treatment, counseling and accountability through drug testing when treating opioid dependence. Dr. Kartman’s data shows positive outcomes related to enrollment in this tribally owned and operated program.

Tribal members, public health experts, and clinicians made the point that the opioid epidemic in Blackfeet Country is a multi-headed beast that requires a multi-headed approach to treatment. This essentially means that our entire community must coordinate our resources; everyone from Housing to Law Enforcement to Health programs has a distinct and essential role to play. There is common agreement that our community’s drug epidemic is rooted in historical and generational



trauma. There is also common agreement that, as a tribe, we are strong and resilient and can create support for our pregnant mothers in order to heal the next generation.

These conversations came out of the many roundtable discussions that offered local people the opportunity to discuss issues such as: Pre-natal screening, medication management, reimbursement issues, counseling needs, child protection services, culturally-based approaches, community-based prevention, and postpartum considerations.

Next steps will be to create a strategic plan for action which will involve input from all stakeholders and will list specific steps to be taken to ensure culturally appropriate, evidence based approaches are used for treatment.

The gathering was organized by the Rocky Mountain Tribal Epidemiology Center in partnership with the Blackfeet tribe, Boston University, and the Montana Healthcare Foundation. Attendees included employees from the Blackfeet Community Hospital, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Blackfeet Child Protection Service, Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, Northern Winds Recovery Center,

Blackfeet Community College, Montana Healthcare Foundation, Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council, Boston Medical Center; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support and the Lummi Healing Spirit Opioid Treatment Program.



The Rocky Mountain Tribal Epidemiology Center (RMTEC) empowers American Indian Tribes in Montana and Wyoming in the development of Public Health services and systems. RMTEC provides epidemiological data in order for tribes to have resources to plan and respond to public health concerns. Ultimately, RMTEC seeks to support healthy Tribal communities that are sustained through lasting collaborative partnerships. For more information about RMTEC and the next steps, interested organizations and community members can visit www.rmtec.org.