

# Penobscot Nation Youth Program passes a 100% Smoke-Free Policy

## Wabanaki Public Health's Tobacco Prevention Program

### Summary

In 2020, **Wabanaki Public Health's District Tobacco Prevention Program** (DTPP) staff teamed up with the **Penobscot Nation Youth Program** to pass a commercial smoke-free policy to protect youth and the adults who work at or visit the program. The model policy ensures that youth will not be exposed to secondhand smoke and their access to commercial tobacco products will be limited. This evidence-based strategy ensures that tribal youth will be protected from commercial tobacco.

### Public Health Challenge

In February, 2020, Time magazine published an article about the efforts of Juul Labs, one of the largest makers of e-cigarettes, to market their product to tribal members throughout the United States. The article describes new Congressional documents that reveal that Juul Labs pitched their products to at least eight Native American tribes. This strategy to target tribal members is similar to the efforts of the commercial tobacco industry in the 1980s and 1990s to target American Indians/Alaska Natives in tribal communities throughout the United States. The result of those efforts was a disparate rate of tobacco use in those communities.



*Aven Sappier and Sebec Neptune giving thanks by the Penobscot River.*

While smoking rates have declined in the U.S. in recent decades, they have remained disproportionately high among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN). In 2018, more than 22% of AI/AN adults reported smoking cigarettes, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and prevention (CDC), compared to 14% of American adults overall. Lung cancer deaths are also more common among AI/AN adults, according to numerous studies.

### Solution

Building relationships is a key component to Wabanaki Public Health's approach when addressing youth commercial tobacco use in their community. Kyle Lolar, the Wətamáweyi Coordinator used his

relationships with community members to initiate conversations about the effectiveness of a new commercial tobacco policy and the health benefits to those who work with youth. The

general understanding is that youth are protected by adults knowing not to smoke around them. Kyle worked closely with John Neptune, the Penobscot Nation Youth Program director to develop a culturally informed approach focusing on commercial tobacco prevention decolonizing the harmful use of commercial tobacco products. Mr. Neptune has worked with youth doing prevention and healthy connections for almost 30 years. Kyle worked with Mr. Neptune to share information on the state laws and data around the effects of second and third hand smoke on the developing brain. This partnership helped inform an already strong commitment to indigenous youth health. Working together to understand the data helped to create a plan for education and information dissemination. This partnership led to a new policy for Penobscot Nation Youth Programs that supports a 100% commercial tobacco product free environment, including e-cigarettes.

Establishing smoke-free policies, social norms and preventing the initiation of tobacco use are the most effective strategies to reduce commercial tobacco use. Penobscot Nation Youth Program - Employees, acquired knowledge of the chemicals in aerosols of the e-cigarettes after a training program with Wabanaki Public Health helped them understand that commercial tobacco products are still working to hook people of all ages. These new devices are marketed to Native Americans in much the same way old commercial tobacco ads and print media did in the not so distant past.

The new Penobscot Nation Youth Program's policy incorporates current best practices. The program became 100% commercial smoke free effective January 1, 2020. The policy update was needed to reflect the ever changing world of commercial tobacco. Education will continue to be the core of this policy. The teachings and use of traditional ceremonial tobacco have always been sacred and important to the Penobscot Nation. Mr. Neptune has taught this important difference between commercial tobacco use and traditional ceremonial medicinal use.

## **Use of Traditional Ceremonial Tobacco**

Our tribal elders have taught us how to pray with ceremonial tobacco, and to give thanks. Scatter or offer to fire as our ancestors have always done. Tobacco is our first medicine and we view tobacco as a sacred plant. We use these teachings and traditional practices to provide education for our tribal communities to help change the social norm around tobacco.

# **“Our Culture Is Prevention”**

## **Sustaining Success**

Through connection, prevention, education, and collaboration the Penobscot Nation Youth Program and Wabanaki Public Health sustain a strong relationship that improves the health and wellbeing of our Tribal community members. **This sustainable 100% commercial smoke free**

**policy will ensure that the youth who participate in activities in this program will be protected from the harms of commercial tobacco.**



**Wabanaki Public Health**  
*Cultivating the health of our communities*



**MAINE  
PREVENTION  
SERVICES**

Maine Center for Disease Control & Prevention  
Department of Health and Human Services

**Division of Environmental “Edoni” Health, Tobacco “Wətamáweyi” Program**

**Division Manager - Esther Mitchell, Tobacco “Wətamáweyi” Coordinator - Kyle Lolar, Tobacco “Wətamáweyi” Educator - Alex London**

**Contact us at: (207)866-1054, 5 Godfrey Drive, Orono ME 04473**