

# Maine Tobacco Prevention Success Story: Culture is Prevention

## Summary

Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness (WPHW) received a request from the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indian's (HBMI) Chief Sabattis to collaborate and assist in a **Traditional Practice of Healing: 4 Sacred Fires Event**. This collaboration allowed the tribal community to participate and receive information and resources around traditional and commercial tobacco.

## Need/ Issue (or "Challenge")

The Houlton Band of Maliseet's 2012 Health Needs Assessment Summary Report states that: "Many Maliseet Tribal members think about losses daily or multiple times a day. Tribal members thought most frequently about the 'loss of respect by our children and grandchildren for elders', followed by 'loss of respect by our children for traditional ways' and 'loss of our culture and language'."

Chief Sabattis reached out to WPHW with a request for a community healing opportunity and potential collaboration. More specifically, supporting her Tribal Elders and Community, as they were rounding a year into a pandemic that has brought many "losses" to everybody!

A study from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found while there have been significant downward trends in the smoking rates among all other race/ethnic groups, there was no significant change in the smoking rates of American Indian/Alaska Natives. The study also found high smoking rates among AI/ANs increased when other risk factors were present.



## Intervention/ Program Description

The 2012 Waponahki Tribal Health Needs Assessment, also identified HBMI as perceiving their top three community strengths as: "Sense of Community, Solidarity & Shared Values", "Family Ties", and "Health Care"; with their top three major sources of pride being "Culture", "Housing Issues", and "Accomplishments."

WPHW's Wətamáweyi (Tobacco) Coordinator, Alexandra London, was able to support, collaborate, and provide resources around traditional and commercial tobacco for the communities' Four Sacred Fires event. At each Sacred Fire location, "One Prayer" traditional tobacco ties and other traditional medicines were available with Traditional Medicine Teaching Resources, Indigenized Smoke Free Home Pledges, and Smokeless Smudge Resources with descriptions. The Sacred Fires were located in the Four Directions (North, East, South, West) and were visible and available to almost all who lived within the Maliseet Riverside Community!



*"The event was very well executed. The community, as well as WPH&W made this event inviting and it gave us a sense of peace. I left the sacred fire feeling revitalized and clean, spiritually and physically!"* Leona Alvarado



## Results/ Success

According to findings from the Wisconsin American Indian Youth Tobacco Survey (2008-2009), the use of traditional tobacco in ceremonies is a protective factor against tobacco abuse. Youth who use traditional tobacco in ceremony were less likely to have ever smoked commercial tobacco or to have smoked commercial tobacco in the last 30 days than those who had not.

With WPHW's response to HBMI's request, we were able to share how tobacco is used in a traditional way, through ceremony, while supporting their self-identified strengths and weaknesses!



## Sustainability

The National Institutes of Health Order Publications, Tobacco, Nicotine, and E- Cigarettes Research Report states: "it is important to note that smoking cessation has been linked with improved mental health—including reduced depression, anxiety, and stress, and enhanced mood and quality of life". Continuing to support community events allows WPHW's Commercial Tobacco Prevention Team to share materials that give access to commercial tobacco cessation support and lends us the opportunities to participate in our Wabanaki traditions with fellow community members. For Indigenous peoples, *culture is prevention*.

## For More Information Contact Us At:

Wabanaki Public Health and  
Wellness

[ALondon@wabanakiphw.org](mailto:ALondon@wabanakiphw.org)

[SNeptune@wabanakiphw.org](mailto:SNeptune@wabanakiphw.org)

[www.wabanakipublichealth.org](http://www.wabanakipublichealth.org)



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