



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 2006 HONOREE

Navajo Nation Methamphetamine Task Force Navajo Nation Department of Behavioral Health Services Navajo Nation

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Navajo community leaders describe the methamphetamine phenomenon as a tidal wave that is overwhelming the entire community. The Navajo Nation police force estimates that 60% of all crimes committed on the reservation are methamphetamine related. In 2006, national news focused on the Navajo Nation as three generations were arrested together for use, distribution, and manufacturing of methamphetamine. Taking a proactive stance on policy issues, options, and recommendations in the areas of prevention, treatment, and/or enforcement, the Methamphetamine Task Forces actively combat the tidal wave of destruction within their communities. Drawing upon education, community involvement, cultural philosophies, and collaborations to address the burgeoning crisis, the Task Forces incorporate participation from elders, youth, recovered addicts and current users, law enforcement, health officials, and policy makers to embrace 'The Beauty Way of Life,' to systematically fight what many view as the most dire crisis in recent history.

Currently, Dinétah the Navajo homelands, is comprised of 26,649 square miles distributed across Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, and is the largest Indian reservation in the United States. Navajo citizens recognize their homelands by the four sacred mountains; Mount Blanca; Mount Taylor; the San Francisco Peaks; and Mount Hesperus. The Navajo Nation (NN) has 225,000 tribal citizens, the largest number of all recognized tribes, with approximately 183,784 people living on the reservation. Formally recognized by the United States federal government in 1923, the NN rejected the Indian Reorganization Act. They have a three branch government with the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The Council, composed of 88 members representing the 110 chapters throughout the reservation lands, is elected every four years. Additionally, they have a Navajo Nation police force with 196 Navajo commissioned officers (one officer for every 136 miles). As of the 2000 Census, per capita income was \$6,625 and unemployment was 42.6%.

The Nation's lands used to be ideally suited for methamphetamine (meth) trafficking, manufacturing and distribution. The reservation is positioned directly along an established drug route from Mexico and drug dealers and traffickers often gravitate toward Indian lands, believing they will not easily be detected or punished. Until 2003, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) was virtually the only agency assuming the role of informing the NN about increased illegal activities regarding methamphetamines within the Nation. From September 2002 to July 2004, case studies were conducted by a special agent to the FBI who listed crimes associated with meth use as including: sexual assaults; shootings; stolen trucks, computers, and guns; homicides; assaults on Navajo officers; and stabbings. In 2003 a Youth Risk Behavioral Survey administered to schools on the NN and bordering towns indicated that overall 15% of the high school students reported lifetime meth use. The Shiprock outpatient treatment center saw meth related cases increase from 3.4% to 8% during 2003-2004. From the fiscal year (FY) 1998 to FY 2005 the Navajo Area Indian Health Service (NAIHS) facilities reported 450 amphetamine-related cases with 35% of these cases being registered in the Tuba City Service Unit. The same area reported at least 14 meth related deaths in the last year.

On a national level, the Indian Health Service (IHS) reports meth use among Native Americans to be three times higher than that of the general population and that 30% of native youth have tried the devastating drug. Clearly, Indian Country is under siege with regard to the drug and its overwhelming effects.

In 2004, all offices of the Navajo Department of Behavioral Health Services (DBHS), a Section 638 program of the IHS, began Meth Task Forces, providing forums to create collaborations, awareness, and education to address the meth crisis. The Task Forces' efforts have made tremendous impact throughout the Nation including generating unprecedented citizenry participation, the effective indigenization of public policy, implementation of strict legal codes, and a model for system based problem solving, all while strengthening Navajo culture, communities, and individuals.

An immediate ground swell of participation began through initial efforts of the Task Forces, garnering participation from health care workers, law enforcement (FBI, state and county police, BIA, tribal police), tribal and state leaders, school staff, tribal housing authorities, IHS, social workers, faith based churches and programs, parents, and youth. Each Task Force is chartered to serve the needs of their individual communities, and coordinate with multiple local agencies, while collaborating with the other Task Forces. Recognizing the importance of putting meth use in a cultural context, the Task Forces drew stark contrasts between a life with meth present and the traditional Beauty Way, that emphasizes healing and health.

Through multiple consultations with Navajo youth nationwide, Navajo words describing meth were identified. Forums were also held to enlist the assistance of the Traditional Practitioner's sanctioned by the DBHS and the official Navajo Medicine Men's Association for developing and approving an official Navajo word for methamphetamine. A national concerted effort is being conducted to identify a specific word for methamphetamine in the Navajo language. The effort brings the issue to the forefront while reiterating cultural mores. For example, community discussions have focused on the impact that the spoken name for meth might have on ancient prophecies of the Navajo, placing the modern crisis in a historical, mythical, and contemporary context. By situating the crisis within the Navajo language, all elements of the crisis are accessible to most of the population. Educational efforts by the Task Forces and the partnerships forged create an environment where citizens come together to educate themselves in a culturally legitimate manner.

Measures to include all the citizens of the Nation are implemented. Radio programs, public service announcements, newspaper ads, and annual national meth summits are created. It is estimated that over 80,000 people have participated in presentations Nation wide, with one presenter reaching 19,000 citizens in a single district. The Tuba City Meth Task Force presents at least every two weeks at a local school, including headstart, primary, elementary, middle, and high school levels. Collaborations include other agencies and business, such as WIC programs, Department of Youth Services, Navajo Housing Authority, United States Attorney's Office, local grocery stores, locally operated hotels, and other businesses throughout the reservation. Locally operated hotel staff participated in a training session and the very next day reported suspicious activity because of their increased awareness, resulting in confiscation of large quantities of meth and several arrests.

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FBI agents.

In addition to utilizing Navajo language and philosophy in all the educational and promotional materials developed, the Task Forces and affiliated partners go beyond disseminating information. They use the momentum of their efforts to indigenize public policy being set on Navajo lands. Efforts of the Task Forces span existing generations, formal agencies, local Chapters, schools and informal groups. Not content with the federal regulations and penalties associated with drug use and possession on the reservation, the Task Forces lobbied to have meth declared a controlled substance. Resulting in the Navajo Nation Council unanimously passing a code adding meth as an illegal substance on the reservation in February 2005, empowering NN law enforcement officers to respond to meth related crimes. Now, not only the FBI are responding to meth infractions, but the NN law and FBI work together regarding meth issues. An anti-meth walk was organized across the Navajo Nation, concluding in a presentation to the Navajo Nation Council. The vice president of the Navajo Nation worked to have the Health and Human Services (HHS) director declare the Navajo Nation a disaster area due to increased threats from meth use and devastation caused by its use.

The Nation also held a National Day of Prayer specifically addressing the meth crisis. Treatment, prevention, and law enforcement are also critical components of the Task Forces' efforts in combating the tidal wave of destruction. Outpatient and inpatient treatment programs are underway with involvement from the Task Forces, combining existing national proven treatment standards with traditional Navajo healing and belief ways. DBHS is actively refining NN policies, procedures, and protocols through needs assessments, multiple prevention strategies, evidence-based prevention services, and outcome evaluation of services. DBHS clinicians have generated in-depth protocols for both inpatient and outpatient treatment regimes and include coordinated efforts with multiple agencies. The former Shiprock Indian Health Service Hospital is being renovated into a 72-bed Navajo Regional Residential Treatment Center that will operate as a level III.5 American Society of Addiction Medicine treatment facility. The system based problem solving approach employed by the Task Forces to collaborate, generate awareness, and educate are addressing the meth crisis on multiple levels, while staying true to a Navajo elders' words guidance of, "Not needing more jails, but needing better families."

The Navajo Nation Meth Task Forces prove that citizen participation and cultural legitimacy can transform communities while deeply impacting policies. Their efforts are nothing short of miraculous and are filled with action and conviction. Passage of the addition of meth as a controlled substance to the NN code took only 6 months, the shortest period ever for any other measure presented to the Council. A Navajo Nation police officer stated that in 23 years of law enforcement, he has never seen a community effort that even comes close to the mobilization achieved through the Task Force. Now drug dealers and traffickers regard the Navajo Nation as a less than ideal place to conduct business and the Nation has an ideal model for system based problem solving.

Lessons:

- Especially where community health and safety are at risk, intergenerational civic engagement can be a successful means of addressing pressing local concerns.
- Public policy that is based on and reinforces Indigenous culture is more likely to be effective.
- A nation asserts its sovereign governing rights through laws, ordinances, and policies that clarify its values and what it will do to protect its citizens.

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