

## **Tips and Strategies for Approaching Tribal Leaders**

Tribal leaders care deeply for their community – hence their position as Tribal leaders and officials. However, these positions require that they be knowledgeable and engaged on a variety of issues facing the Tribe, including health, economic development, and governance. All of these take their time and energy. In order to engage Tribal leaders in efforts to recognize and honor National American Indian and Alaska Native Suicide Awareness Day, and continue to support awareness, prevention and treatment efforts throughout the year, please consider the following tips and strategies for approaching Tribal leaders.

### ***When Preparing***

- Create a packet of information that you can share and leave with the Tribal leader. You may consider including some factsheets about local suicide statistics, brochures or handouts from local programs, flyers and information for any local events taking place for National American Indian and Alaska Native Suicide Awareness Day, contact information for yourself, your team/coalition, and/or your program, and any materials that may require the Tribal leader's further action and attention. Leave one packet with the Tribal leader and leave one behind for a staff member, as well.
- Know the local statistics on suicide and the state of local programming so that you are prepared to share this with the leader.
- Although suicide is a powerful issue by itself, it will still help when engaging Tribal leaders to personalize the issue. You can do this by capturing and sharing real stories from Tribal members about how suicide has impacted their lives. You may consider looking for stories about people who have attempted suicide, experienced the intentional passing of a friend or family, or have participated in a dynamic and effective prevention program. These will help to make the statistics that you may share more real for Tribal leaders.
- It is important to plan who will speak and when if you have more than one person meeting with the leader. Take some time in advance to create a 'game plan'. Be sure to plan on being succinct and to the point, and saving the strongest points for the end of the conversation.
- Remember that Tribal leaders wear two hats – they are leaders, but they are also community members.
- Plan on a short meeting with the Tribal leader. Leaders are busy and often have days packed with back to back meetings in different places with different people. It is important to remember that even though you may only get 15-20 minutes to meet with a leader, this does not mean that suicide is not important to the leader.
- Know the leader with whom you are meeting. Know if they have a particular voting record or public comments that may indicate certain issues that they favor.
- Work with the Tribal leader's staff. Do not be upset if you end up actually meeting with the leader's staff. They are often very knowledgeable of individual issues, and they will inform the leader of your views and requests. Treat a meeting with a staffer just as you would treat a meeting with the actual leader.

## ***During the Meeting***

- Do not be late. This is not the time to work on 'Indian time'. A leader may be running a little bit late, but showing up on time indicates how important this issue is to you. If you are on time and the leader is late, then leader may feel apologetic and grant you some special attention.
- Invite somebody with you to the meeting that can meaningfully share their firsthand experiences with suicide. If you cannot, then it will be important to share these stories yourself as a second hand source, and to include them in writing as a handout in the informational packet.
- Be respectful at all times. Remember that a meeting of this nature is not the time to criticize a leader for past actions or inactions, rather you are trying to persuade them that suicide awareness, prevention and treatment is an issue that deserves their attention and action. You generally get that by working with the leader.
- Be prepared for the leader to ask questions of you. This is normal, and is a good indicator that the leader is engaged. Answer the questions clearly and directly. Be sure to answer any questions posed, or set up a time frame and method for following-up if an answer is unknown.
- Early on in the meeting, pose a clear ask of the leader. Know what you would like this leader to do (e.g., sponsor a Tribal resolution, attend an event, speak about the issue publicly), and clearly ask this of them early on. Then repeat it at the end. Without a clear ask, all you are doing is having an informational meeting with a leader, and missing a good opportunity to build a solid ally.
- Highlight any local statistics that would ring truly and powerfully with the leader. But do not focus on the statistics for long, as a parade of numbers can be lost on a person that is not well versed on the issue.
- If a leader disagrees with you, stand up for yourself, debate the issues, but do not become over-argumentative. Emphasize the positives of your standpoint, and always try to end the meeting on a positive note.
- Always end the meeting by spelling out how any the leader can expect you to follow up on any items, a thank you, and show of appreciation.
- Oftentimes, Tribal leaders are also community elders and/or spiritual leaders. Your behavior should follow Tribal protocols for these kinds of interactions.

## ***Following-up***

- Following up is where you work with leaders on carrying out what you have asked of them. It is important that you do not wait for the leader to follow up with you, but you are proactive and send a letter or email thanking the leader and their staff and reiterating the steps for following up.
- Be sure that you send any additional information that the leader requested.
- Following up will probably include working more closely with a member of the Tribal leader's staff. Be sure that those lines of communication are clear.
- If you are asking for the leader to speak in public, be prepared to help the leader craft talking points on the issues.