

# Cherokees Build a Healthy Nation

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The Cherokee Nation's substance abuse program is looking beyond Western medicine to investigate how activities drawn from the tribe's traditions and culture can help deliver better patient outcomes, said Lisa Perkins, Health Promotions and Disease Prevention Coordinator for the Cherokee Nation. Under a Healthy Nations grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the tribe supports community-wide efforts that integrate public awareness campaigns, prevention programs, and services for treatment, aftercare, and support.

"The tribe has centered our Healthy Nations program on wellness. We look at the cultural component, and ways within our tradition to treat those with substance abuse problems," said Perkins. "For example, we may pair an older person in our community or a tribal Elder with someone who needs assistance." The Elder and the person in need of assistance will spend time together. Informal counseling will take place. Prevention activities for children utilize and teach the nation's rich tradition of language, crafts, history and tribal dance.

The Cherokee program offers an extraordinary range of activities, including education on injury prevention/safety, breast and cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS, fetal alcohol syndrome, personal hygiene and diabetes; CPR training; a school wellness program; curriculum; smoking cessation classes; Indian heritage clubs; health fairs; and summer youth fitness camps.

The Wings Running Club is one of its successes. The club offers a self-paced fitness program for all ages and fitness levels. Weekly practices are offered at several communities, and are open to all. As incentives, each club member can earn fitness gear as their walking or running miles accumulate. Road races and fun-walks are held monthly. As Perkins attests, local leaders feel that the club has made a significant impact on fitness within local American Indian communities.

Healthy Nations' goal is to "help Native Americans reduce the harm caused by substance abuse in their communities," according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a member of the National Healthy People Consortium. It intends to demonstrate that tribes and communities can, over time, achieve substantial reductions in the demand for and the use of alcohol and other harmful substances, including tobacco and illegal drugs. Oversight is provided by a National Program Office at the University of Colorado Health Science Center.

The foundation administers a six-year, two-stage competitive initiative, which began in 1992 and will provide up to \$13.5 million for tribes and community organizations serving Indian people. In the first stage, 15 two-year development and feasibility grants of up to \$150,000 each were awarded. Grantees successfully completing the first stage were eligible for four-year implementation grants of up to \$1 million each.

In a pamphlet published by the tribe, Joe Byrd, Principal Chief, said "Health care funding for our Cherokee people continues to dwindle year after year at the same time we need and demand more quality care. Preventing health problems before they begin is the key in keeping our medical costs down and keeping diseases such as diabetes from devastating our people." He went on to say, "Exercise and a healthy diet can prevent many health problems later in life and boost self-esteem among our youth. The Cherokee Nation Healthy Nation Program teaches our children as well as their parents ways to stay healthy and sponsor activities for our youth."

*For more information on Healthy Nations, please call Drs. Spero Manson or Candace Fleming at the National Program Office, Healthy Nations Initiative, Division of American Indian and Alaska Native Programs, Department of Psychiatry, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center: (303) 315-9272, or visit <http://www.uchsc.edu/sml/hnp>. ❖*

