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HONORING NATIONS: 2002 HONOREE

Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations Colville, Spokane, Kalispel, Kootenai, Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, Umatilla (located in Spokane, Washington)

Contact:

5600 East 8th Ave, Spokane, WA 99212

Tel: (509) 533-691 Fax: (509) 535-2863

Website: www.healinglodge.org

Owned by a consortium of seven Indian nations, the Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations is a treatment center that helps Native American youth and their families heal from the trauma of alcohol and drug abuse. Services include in-patient chemical dependency programs, mental health counseling, family counseling, a juvenile justice improvement project, recreation, education, and cultural activities. Since its creation in 1989, the Healing Lodge has served over 1,500 youth from more than 150 Indian nations, giving them fresh opportunities to better themselves and their communities.

Substance abuse is a relatively recent problem in Native America, taking root only over the last few centuries. Nonetheless, it has become discouragingly pervasive problem, especially among Indian youth. Statistics show that illicit drug use in this group is higher than among the youth of any other ethnic group. The alcohol-related death rate of Indian youth is seventeen times the level for all others. Clearly, treating substance abuse among Indian youth is a pressing challenge – and a difficult one. According to statistics from the State of Washington, simply being Native American is the primary indicator for failure in youth inpatient treatment. Other indicators include poor health, poverty, lack of services, and lack of education, all of which disproportionately affect American Indians.

Individual Indian nations often struggle to offer their youth effective, culturally relevant substance abuse treatment. Divergent tribal and federal priorities and limited resources have meant that tribes relying on direct service from the Indian Health Service (IHS) have rarely received the benefit of community-based substance abuse treatment programs for youth. Some tribes have been able to remedy this by contracting to take over certain IHS programs under the provisions of the Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (P.L. 93-638) and re-prioritizing spending to create local, youth-focused treatment programs. Despite this opportunity, smaller tribes still find it difficult to support inpatient facilities on their own. And, while some tribes have been able to form inter-tribal programs under P.L. 93-638, many have been reluctant to do so, making it even more difficult to provide tribal citizens (and tribal youth) with adequate resources to address substance abuse related problems.

In an effort to address the need for effective youth substance abuse treatment, seven northwestern Indian nations (the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Spokane Tribe of Indians, the Kalispel Tribe of Indians, The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, the Coeur d'Alene Indian Tribe, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation) worked together to found the Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations. Funded primarily through contracted funds from the Indian Health Service and grant funds from the US Department of Justice, the Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations is located on forty acres of secluded, wooded land in Spokane, Washington. It features resident and guest quarters, administrative offices, educational facilities, a gym, a cafeteria, separate male and female sweat lodges, and extensive walking paths for its residents. The Healing Lodge offers holistic, culturally relevant substance abuse treatment for up to thirty youth at a time. Residents from across

the country, referred to the Healing Lodge through tribal courts, chemical dependency counselors, child welfare workers, and families, usually stay at the Healing Lodge between thirty and ninety days. Residents with foster care issues may remain up to 120 days. The treatment provided by the Healing Lodge includes one-on-one, group, and family therapy.

In the past several years, the Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations has experienced notable success in treating substance abuse among Native youth. Since its inception in 1989, the Healing Lodge has served over 1,500 youth from over 150 tribes. Although the Healing Lodge serves youth who are confronting more risk factors than the average youth substance abuser, it successfully transitions many of its residents back into their communities at the state average. Between 1999 and 2001, the percentage of residents who successfully transitioned increased from 43 percent to 55 percent, and it is predicted to increase even more in 2002 and beyond. Outcome studies show that the Healing Lodge treatment has lasting effects: 75 percent of former residents show less drug and alcohol use. Many former residents attribute their recovery to the cultural components that the program has to offer.

In 1999, the Healing Lodge hired a Native American cultural advisor. Since that time, the Healing Lodge has moved the management of symptoms away from pharmacotherapy and towards traditional Native American herbs and medicines, the incorporation of cultural awareness, and physical activity. For example, in addition to staff assessments of each resident upon entry, each resident is asked to assess his or her own condition by creating a personalized medicine wheel. Through such integration of traditional and modern therapies, the Healing Lodge provides their residents a holistic approach to substance abuse treatment.

Several factors underlie the success of the Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations. First, the Healing Lodge is an excellent example of how distinct tribal governments can cooperate to improve the lives of their citizens and the quality of their health. Working together, these seven nations developed a substance abuse treatment facility that may have been difficult to support independently. These nations not only recognized the problems that their respective communities faced, but also developed practical strategies to overcome them. For example, the Healing Lodge is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives from all seven nations, plus one at-large member. This board structure encourages intertribal cooperation and gives each of the tribes a sense of ownership over the institution and its services. Importantly, the Board serves as an effective advocate for the Healing Lodge within each of the individual tribes, thereby ensuring broad-based support.

Second, the Healing Lodge administration and staff allow their focus on youth to elicit their best efforts in treating and combating substance abuse. The Healing Lodge staff understands that treating youth for substance abuse problems differs from treating adults. For one, the Healing Lodge firmly believes that youth treatment must involve family and community treatment. Through encouragement from Healing Lodge staff and on their own initiative, tribal leaders frequently attend activities at the Healing Lodge to show support for their youth. As importantly, the Healing Lodge surrounds its residents with opportunities that offer real alternatives to substance abuse. Residents at the Healing Lodge benefit from athletic facilities, computer labs, GED preparation and testing facilities, career exploration opportunities, and a creative writing workshop. These facilities encourage residents to take steps to change and improve their lives.

Third, the Healing Lodge is distinctive because of the integration of culture into its substance abuse treatment programs. This dedication to culturally relevant treatment is impressive, especially in a setting where the integration of culture might appear to be difficult given the sheer number of cultures that are represented within the resident body. Yet the Healing Lodge is able to tap into widely shared cultural tenets while accommodating distinct cultural beliefs. Residents are welcomed to the Healing Lodge in a ceremony that reminds them that they are supported by the six generations behind them and that their health and well-being will benefit their respective communities seven generations from today. Staff members also rely on commonly used symbols such as medicine wheels, dream catchers, and beadwork to help their residents connect (or re-connect) to their heritage while undergoing treatment. To encourage residents to learn more about their own cultures and to use

cultural practices to advance their healing, staff members communicate on a regular basis with cultural advisors on the reservations from which the residents come. Through this contact, Healing Lodge staff members help residents develop culturally specific personal treatment programs, provide education on tribal cultural differences, and invite speakers from various Indian nations and Native communities to encourage the youth in their recovery process. Exit interviews emphasize the importance of culture. Patient satisfaction surveys routinely cite the cultural component of treatment as the most effective component in reducing substance abuse.

Finally, the Healing Lodge has developed creative strategies to encourage sustainability and continued success. For example, it has developed and implemented a multi-year strategic financial plan that takes into account client needs as well as new developments in treatment options – an approach that helps ensure that the Healing Lodge’s programs and services reflect client needs rather than allowing federal funding priorities determine its programmatic direction. Having identified outreach and mental health as priority areas for expansion, the Healing Lodge is positioned to engage in strategic, targeted fundraising. Strategic fundraising, combined with sound budget management practices (e.g. regular audits, expense projections and reporting), are paying off in terms of funding levels and stability. Also contributing to the Healing Lodge’s sustained effectiveness is its commitment to staff development. Staff members are encouraged to regularly review relevant medical literature and to integrate effective therapies into their practice. It also emphasizes the cultural competence of its staff and has actively worked to increase the proportion of Native staff from 20 percent to 40 percent in the last few years. Lastly, the Healing Lodge has implemented effective monitoring systems that allow staff to monitor the progress of residents in real time and to track patterns in the process of care in addition to evaluations of program effectiveness. Driven by an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of its clients, Healing Lodge runs a first-class operation.

The Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations is a tribal governance success story in numerous ways. As an inter-tribal initiative, it exemplifies how tribes can come together to address shared problems efficiently and effectively. As a treatment facility, the Healing Lodge presents a compelling model for how spirituality and clinical treatment can be combined in a synergistic manner that benefits clients. And as a tribal institution, it embraces good management practices that assure its strong presence and sustained effectiveness for years to come. Most importantly, the Healing Lodge is helping Native youths help themselves.

Lessons:

- Multi-tribe partnerships can be useful for smaller tribes interested in combating chronic health problems, since a collaborative effort may be greater than the sum of its parts. “Economies of scale” exist in substance abuse treatment because effective programs depend upon multiple specialties, each of which might be too costly for a small tribe to provide on its own.
- Incorporating indigenous culture into substance abuse treatment (and other social service programs) can enhance program effectiveness. Critically, a focus on culturally appropriate treatment need not work against partnerships between culturally different tribes, as the cultural component of care can be designed on an individual-by-individual basis.
- Looking to client needs rather than federal funding priorities to determine strategic direction keeps tribal social services appropriately focused. A good way to ensure a match between programmatic goals and fundraising is to integrate funding strategies into overall strategic plans.