

Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth Podcast Series

Episode: Adapting Programs for Tribal Youth

[John Bollenbacher:] Welcome to Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth, a podcast series by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. This series is produced by FYSB's Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, as part of The Exchange.

I'm John Bollenbacher, a producer for The Exchange. Here in the podcast we talk with people implementing programs that prevent teen pregnancy and help prepare teens for adulthood. While overall teen birth rates are decreasing, we're not done yet. Teen births remain high among vulnerable youth.

For this podcast we're joined by Lisa Abremson who's working with tribal youth. Lisa, tell us a little about yourself and the work you're doing.

[Lisa Abremson]: My name is Lisa Abremson, I am a Program Director for the Tribal PREP program at the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, and I'm also an Evaluator for our Maternal and Child Health Programs there as well.

[John Bollenbacher]: Can you tell us a little bit about the philosophy or maybe strategy that you folks are using in your programs?

[Lisa Abremson]: OK, well the philosophy is really kind of driven by, you know, obviously the needs and the requirements of the grant. However, we have the distinction of working within tribal communities. And so Inter-Tribal Council is the grantee but we work with five other tribal communities to implement and achieve the program objectives of Tribal PREP. So it's an interesting, it's an interesting process to bring the program requirements and then try to facilitate their implementation within the different tribal communities.

[John Bollenbacher]: And for those who don't know, what are some of the unique challenges or maybe even opportunities of working with tribal youth?

[Lisa Abremson]: Well I guess there are a couple. One is that tribes are sovereign nations. And so we have to educate folks a lot of the time on what it's like to be able to implement a program that's generally designed for the general population into a tribal setting. And so that's a really interesting process, and sometimes it works, and then sometimes you have to do a lot of work to make it work. And the other is that we're required to implement evidence-based programs, and a lot of the time, evidence-based programs aren't tested within tribal communities. And so it's really nice through Tribal PREP that they had at the onset of the program this training, really, really well developed training, for adaptations because those are, those are really important to be able to make those to implement within a tribal community.

[John Bollenbacher]: And that's one of the interesting things about the PREP grant process is that it seems like it's a little more flexible, a little more open.

[Lisa Abremson]: Yeah. Yeah, the adaptations have been critical to make it culturally appropriate for us, and so that's been really nice. That's been really nice.

[John Bollenbacher]: So what are some of these cultural boundaries that really call for adaptations and differences in implementation when you're working in these communities?

[Lisa Abremson]: When you implement a program within tribal communities, we like to hear and see programs that are familiar to us and familiar to our population. You know, if we have materials, we like to see, tribal people like to see our own faces in there because we know that there's been an effort invested into making sure it's appropriate for our community. And so, if we hear the way we speak and the way we communicate and we see our faces in that, then people are more likely to be accepting of the program and respond well to the program.

[John Bollenbacher]: Mm-hmm, and that's critically important because you need the teens to show up and you need buy-in, right?

[Lisa Abremson]: Right. And we did a needs assessment, actually, that was also built into PREP. That was really interesting because there isn't a lot of work within Michigan tribal communities, at least in the ones we're working with, there wasn't a lot of work being done specifically on teen pregnancy prevention and STI prevention. And so it's really important, because to establish yourself as a program and really go to people for those topics, you need to make sure that your materials are culturally relevant and culturally tailored and culturally specific.

[John Bollenbacher]: So within the programs, can you talk a little bit more about some of the things the kids are learning and the courses that are available to them?

[Lisa Abremson]: Sure. So we're implementing Making Proud Choices, and we went through a pretty extensive process of looking at our needs assessment data, then we with, along with the other participating tribal communities, went over that data. We went over several of the different evidence-based or promising programs curricula, and we decided as a group what would work best for us. And then we implemented our own kind of teachings into that. Now even within Michigan, there are various differences between the tribal communities, so we picked teachings that were familiar to each of the tribes. They might be a little bit different but something that we could all kind of come to together to identify that that is specific to our Michigan tribal communities. And that was the seven grandfather teachings, and boy, I wish I could remember all seven. I know I can remember at least a few of them but it's just honesty, truth, wisdom, bravery, respect, those are just five of them and then we incorporate that into the Making Proud Choices curriculum that's being taught for the youth within the tribal communities.

[John Bollenbacher]: So clearly, we've got to focus on the country's most vulnerable youth in this kind of work, and in a lot of ways, tribal youth might almost have a special category within vulnerable youth. Can you talk about tribal youth and how they're maybe some of the most vulnerable people that we work with?

[Lisa Abremson]: Right. So we're exposed on several fronts in terms of being vulnerable. One is that our communities have some of the highest rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, and addiction within their communities. Some of the highest rates of sexual assault and rape, and those are risk factors for our youth when they're exposed to that pretty young. In addition, tribal youth themselves have some of the highest rates of suicide for any racial or ethnic group, and it's a really, really bad problem right now. There's a lot of focus on our risk factors though. Our tribes and our tribal youth have a lot of really positive and protective factors, I guess, that you could also talk about that we are trying to promote more as well in that our tribes recognize, culturally and just in general, that our tribal youth are going to be leaving us in the future. And so tribes have really invested in tribal youth programs, and so we need to figure out how to incorporate teen pregnancy prevention and STI prevention within those already established tribal youth programs because they're really strong programs, and really promising.

[John Bollenbacher]: So are you finding there's a lot of partnering going on?

[Lisa Abremson]: We're starting the partnerships, since we have received funding through Tribal PREP. It's really been the first, that we know of, concerted effort to target teen pregnancy and STI with a tribal youth program like PREP. And so part of that is partnering with Boys and Girls Clubs, tribal youth councils that participate in the Unity Program, and other tribal youth programs that are implemented and that are organized within tribal communities.

[John Bollenbacher]: So how's it been going so far?

[Lisa Abremson]: It's going really well, actually. We were really nervous about broaching these subjects with parents, with tribal leadership, and with our elders, and we found out through our needs assessment that it was really supportive, actually. These messages are supported within the tribal community, but they needed somebody to take the lead because there wasn't anybody to take the lead. And so that was great, getting that feedback, however, there's still the actual implementation and so far, it's been really well received within, within the tribal communities. We haven't had any complaints about the content. There's been a lot of community support, and that's been really wonderful to see.

[John Bollenbacher]: So there's definitely the sex ed and the STI prevention topics. Are there other adult preparation skills that you're working on with the youth?

[Lisa Abremson]: Sure. Well, our three are Healthy Relationships, they are Parent and Child Communication, and Education Completion. The first two are covered in the Making Proud Choices curriculum, however that doesn't mean we don't try to target those with the community outreach that we do. And I would have to say that the, first, that the implementation of the evidence-based model is really important, but we've built in the community outreach which has been equally important to establish the program within the tribal community. So we've adapted the Making Proud Choices to also include Education Completion, and we have utilized some materials from the U.S. Department of Education to set goals around completing high school and also moving on to either vocation school or to a two- or four-year degree within the college arena. And then tribes have also done some interesting things too, like they've done campus visits and also partnered with their education programs to continue to reach out with that adult preparation subject.

[John Bollenbacher]: So why do you think it adds so much value to work on these adulthood preparation subjects, in addition to providing sexual health education?

[Lisa Abremson]: I think it's important in the grand scheme of youth development and prevention of all types of things. Youth Development, Developing Healthy Relationships, Education Completion, and Parent and Child Communication is primary prevention for many different, chronic disease, many different issues that we have within tribal communities and that we have within the population at large. So, I think that goes back to me saying kind of the evidence-based model and that implementation is very important, but equally important is the community outreach that we do, especially as it relates to the adult preparation subjects.

[John Bollenbacher]: And it sounds like you've had to do a lot of customization and can you talk a little bit about how difficult that was and maybe give some advice to other tribal communities that are looking to take on this kind of work?

[Lisa Abremson]: Well, I think tribal communities are pretty familiar with making something fit for them that they have to use. We are faced with that all the time in working with grants and in working with programs that are created for the general population. So tribes are really used to, and really, really skilled at making something work for them. And so it's listening to our staff, and it's listening to our community, really, that is the key to successful implementation and adaptation of an evidence-based model or promising practice.

[John Bollenbacher]: So you've been doing this about four years. Can you talk a little bit about any of the differences you've seen in the tribal youth, any interesting stories?

[Lisa Abremson]: Making Proud Choices is targeted to ages 11-14, and we were wondering how that was going to go. And I have to say it's really inspiring what our tribal youth can handle, what they can comprehend, and what they can communicate with somebody who's trained to implement content like that. It's inspiring and amazing and really exciting. So, it's been, it's been wonderful to see.

[John Bollenbacher]: Is there anything else that people should know about PREP programs and tribal communities?

[Lisa Abremson]: I just think there's a lot to be learned from, from tribal communities in terms of how they've implemented Tribal PREP. I know that I learn a lot from the other tribal programs that we have through this project and appreciate the work that they're doing. And I think that the work is inspiring in that it's an effort by community members who care a lot about our youth and care a lot about what happens to them. And, and it's an honor to be a part of.

[John Bollenbacher]: Lisa, thanks so much for taking the time and sharing this valuable information. And I want to thank our audience for listening to this Family and Youth Services broadcast. Please check out all of our other videos and podcasts on our website.

Thank you for tuning in. As you heard, our work isn't done, and it will take more leaders like Lisa Abremson to prep teens for the future.

Be encouraged, and get connected, at The Exchange. Go to teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov.

This podcast series is produced by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. FYSB is committed to a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals, and families can live healthy, productive, and violence-free lives.