



Tribal Nations Meet Top Policymakers to Address Opioid Crisis

Tulalip Tribes, Washington-August 31, 2023/NPAIHB -- Over 1,000 Tribal leaders, frontline workers, and federal and state policymakers met in Tulalip, Washington, last week to consider the solutions, collaboration, and policy recommendations to directly address the devastating impacts of fentanyl and opioid drug abuse in tribal communities nationwide.

The National Tribal Opioid Summit, set in motion by Lummi Nation Councilman Nickolaus Lewis, and supported by the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board along with regional and national partners, was brought forth in response to significant increases in fentanyl use. Since 2018, the rate of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) opioid overdose deaths nationally has increased 174%; and in the Northwest, death rate from drug overdose is between two (2) and three (3) times the national average.

Congressional representatives, White House officials, and federal and state agency leaders participated in the Summit, including: Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA); Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA 2nd District); Dr. Rahul Gupta, Director, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP- see press release); Roselyn Tso, Director, Indian Health Service; Dr. Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, Assistant Secretary, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); Dr. Nora Volkow, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); and Dr. Karina Walters, Director of Tribal Health Research Office, National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The Summit was anchored by a panel of Tribal citizens who candidly and vulnerably shared their lived experiences with opioid misuse, either as former users now in recovery or as affected family members. Tribal leaders and Summit participants – who waited in line for an hour to address the panelists shared their deep appreciation along with their own stories. These stories of both grief and collective resilience served as a call to action and a reminder of the urgency of the moment.

At the conclusion of the Summit, NPAIHB Chair Nickolaus Lewis, called back the panelists and asked if the long list of policy priorities and strategic action items reflected their experiences. “Did we hear you?” The panelists responded, “yes.” They were heard.

The National Opioid Tribal Response Strategic Agenda will be updated with feedback from the Summit along with a set of Tribal resolutions with state and federal policy recommendations. These resolutions will be moved forward at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI) in September and at the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in November.



“We have our directives from Tribal leaders, community members and those with lived experiences. We will do all we can to not disappoint them,” added NPAIHB Chairman Nickolaus Lewis.

“We’re pulling people out of the river. At some point, we need to go upstream and figure out why they’re falling in.” | **Nate Tyler, Makah Tribal Council**

“Visiting here the past two days in tribal communities, I have learned the extraordinary support systems that people have here. I have learned [of] the commitment [and] the care that one has to the other... To me, this is one of the most powerful things. How do we bring the power of Native communities and use it to change the system?” | **Dr. Nora Volkow, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse**