

FIGHTING BACK AGAINST ALCOHOL ABUSE AND DRUG DEPENDENCY

Indian communities and leaders are creating their own programs to deal with the problems caused by alcoholism and other forms of chemical dependencies.

Nechi: The Nechi Institute On Alcohol And Drug Education in Alberta is an organization which designs, develops and markets training programs for persons, Native and Non-Native, who are recovering from drug and alcohol abuse. The Nechi program is funded by the Federal and Alberta Governments, as well as by private corporations including oil companies. But the Institute is entirely controlled and managed by Native persons. The programs focus on life skills which help the trainees to develop personal confidence. It also develops skills necessary for jobs in areas of retail sales such as waitresses, sales clerks and bank tellers. The success of the programs has led to working agreements between Nechi and private sector companies, and has prompted government departments in Alberta to send their own students through the training.

At present, Nechi uses one of the most sophisticated information programs in Canada in assisting its clients with drug and alcohol dependencies. The program is called the Native Alcohol Program Information System (NAPIS), and it was adapted from a similar program that was developed in the United States. Federal officials in Ottawa who have examined the system have judged it to be excellent both in design and operation. Nechi, however, has not been able to obtain funds to assist in the operation of NAPIS.

Nechi has also developed counsellor training programs for prisoners, through which the prisoners themselves become counsellors to other inmates in matters related to drug abuse.

Prison officials in Alberta have been highly complimentary of Nechi's efforts. Not only has the incidence of drug abuse been reduced, but prison officials believe that relationships between prisoners and guards are noticeably improved wherever this counselling program is in operation.

Local Initiative: While Nechi represents a sophisticated and comprehensive approach to the problems of alcohol and drug dependency, there is a great deal that can be done right at the community level and by the community members themselves. As Joanne Restoule, Chairperson of NNAAP (National Native Alcohol Abuse Program) points out:

"Once the people on the reserves realize that they have the freedom to develop their own solutions to the problems caused by alcohol abuse, unique and even remarkable ways for coping will just bubble up, especially from the older generation. The elders have

wisdom and experience on their side, and they really know how to get to the core of community problems. The Rediscovery Program in B.C. is just one example of how a community can deal with alcohol problems in a creative way."

Rediscovery: The Rediscovery Program has been operating for four years on the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia. The Program has been developed for troubled teenagers, most of whom have alcohol or drug problems. It consists of an intensive two week wilderness camp which focuses on Indian history, physical fitness, food gathering, and nature studies. Based at the ancient abandoned Haida Indian village of Kiusta, the program has proved so successful that the provincial correction service contracts for a certain number of spaces within the programs for Native teenagers under its care.

Projects like Rediscovery are the result of community commitment and action and therefore should receive support from a revised NNAAP program, as outlined in Recommendation 7.

