WHAT TRIBAL LEADERS NEED TO KNOW: Fighting overdose and addiction to save our people—the time is now.

Too many of our relatives are dying from overdose or alcohol-related harm.

In 2023, drug overdose deaths exceeded 100,000.[1]

178,000 people die of alcohol-related causes each year.[2]

Our communities are being devastated–and we have the power to save lives.

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a Medical Illness

SUD is a **chronic disease**, like diabetes or high blood pressure. It is influenced by genetics, trauma, cultural factors, and access to care. It affects Native people at high rates, but it is treatable–and preventable.

Medication = Recovery

Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)
Buprenorphine and methadone reduce risk of death by more than half.[3]

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)
Naltrexone and gabapentin reduce heavy drinking and support recovery.[4]

Medication keeps people alive long enough to heal. Counseling alone may not be enough.[5]

Naloxone Saves Lives

- Reverses overdose in minutes
- Safe, effective, and now available over the counter
- 16% of people who receive take-home naloxone at the emergency department went on to reverse an overdose[6]

Overdose Risk Peaks After Survival

The first 48 hours after an overdose are the deadliest.[7]

Most people don't fill prescriptions for naloxone or medication after ER visits.[8]

Immediate access to medication and support can stop the cycle of death.[9]

What Tribal Leaders Can Do

- Make naloxone widely available in tribal offices, programs, and housing
- Support medications for addiction treatment (MAT) in clinics and jails
- Reduce stigma and increase education
- Fund overdose prevention and peer support efforts
- Speak truth and offer healing–not shame
- Treat addiction like the disease it is

Our people deserve to live. We have lost too many. You have the power to protect future generations. Let's build systems that honor life, culture, and healing.

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Additions to Consider for Tribal Leaders

1. System-Level Strategies

- Provide tribal leaders tools to think beyond programs and move toward systemic change
- Adopt a Tribal Resolution recognizing addiction as a disease and committing to overdose prevention
- Integrate SUD and overdose prevention into tribal public health plans, emergency response, and community health assessments
- Include people with lived experience in advisory councils and decision-making bodies
- Leverage opioid settlement funds for peer-led and Indigenous-centered care
- Partner with local hospitals for emergency department-to-tribal referrals and warm handoffs
- Support workforce development for tribal MAT providers, peer support workers, and cultural wellness specialists

2. Infrastructure and Policy Support

- Establish or expand tribal MAT and low-barrier clinics
- Create tribal peer navigator roles across justice, health, and housing systems
- Fund mobile outreach teams to meet people where they are
- Secure data-sharing agreements (with consent) for overdose follow-up care
- Ensure cultural protections and privacy in all programs, especially for youth and reentry

3. Community Engagement and Healing

- Host Overdose Awareness Day events and community memorials with dignity and ceremony
- Normalize person-first culture by holding talking circles that include Elders, youth, and people who have used drugs
- Provide community education that includes:
  - Myths vs. facts about addiction
  - Naloxone training for every household
  - Understanding SUD as connected to historical and ongoing trauma

4. Data and Monitoring (Optional Advanced Addition)

- Help leaders track their impact and advocate for resources
- Collect anonymous data on overdoses, naloxone reversals, and MAT access
- Use findings to advocate for funding, policy changes, and system improvements

Our sovereignty gives us the power—and the responsibility—to protect our people in our own ways. This is not about punishment. This is about survival, dignity, and love. Tribal leadership is sacred work. Let us lead with compassion and evidence. Let us be the generation that ends the loss.

Endnotes

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CONNECT WITH BRIDGE

For more information or support:
bridgetotreatment.org/national-bridge

Opioid Response Network

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Medicine Wheel of Recovery and Overdose Prevention

Honoring Indigenous Healing and Modern Tools

We Are Stronger Together

Mental (Mind)

Knowledge, Beliefs, and Awareness

Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT): Buprenorphine, methadone, naltrexone

Psychoeducation on substance use and withdrawal

Trauma-informed therapy

Peer Support Specialist Training

Breaking stigma through storytelling and public education

Understanding relapse as part of healing

Physical (Body)

Safety, Health, Survival

Naloxone (Narcan) distribution and training

Fentanyl test strips and overdose prevention kits

Drop-in clinics and outreach vans

Low-barrier access to MAT, detox, shelter, food

Hygiene stations (showers, clothing, safe supplies)

Safe medicine storage and lockboxes

Emotional (Heart)

Relationships, Emotions, Support

Talking circles and peer-led support groups

Family healing and reunification support

Grief and loss ceremonies for those lost to overdose

Meet people where they are with love and compassion

Youth mentorship and safe spaces

Nonjudgmental care for people who use drugs

Spiritual (Spirit)

Culture, Ceremony, Purpose

Sweat lodges, songs, and smudging

Traditional healing and plant medicines

Connection to elders and language

Seasonal ceremonies and rites of passage

Land-based healing (horse programs, camp retreats)

Welcome home ceremonies for people coming out of jail, rehab, or hospital

Healing happens in many ways. All paths are sacred. We save lives by honoring culture, protecting our people, and treating everyone with dignity.

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