Minnesota Reservation Works with State Health Department to Fight Hepatitis C

In response to clusters of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection near the White Earth Reservation, a coalition of tribal leaders, the Minnesota Department of Health, and other stakeholders was formed to increase screening rates.

Minnesota has limited resources to deal with viral hepatitis, even though this infection is fully integrated with the state’s HIV services. The White Earth Reservation in northwest Minnesota is committed to addressing high rates of hepatitis C with the help of the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and native health services. A native community-based health organization, MDH, Indian Health Service physicians, and tribal home health nurses worked together to form a groundbreaking collaboration and hold a health summit that focused on HCV prevention. The generation age 48-68 particularly benefited from this work; HCV screening rates for this group doubled since new CDC recommendations for HCV testing among baby boomers were released.

Steps Taken:

- In 2010, MDH surveillance staff identified clusters of HCV in the region of the state where the White Earth Reservation is located. MDH investigated the clusters. Epidemiologists and an HCV outreach specialist/disease investigator worked with physicians and, more importantly, home health nurses with established trust and access within the community to reach the impacted population.
- Sacred Spirits, a native health community-based organization (CBO), which operates outside of tribal government, engaged as a partner and provided HIV testing, HCV testing, and syringe access services.
- The White Earth HIV and HCV Harm Reduction Coalition was formed with the intent to reduce HIV and HCV rates and promote health, bringing together native leaders and health authorities from the area. The White Earth HIV and HCV Harm Reduction Coalition was ratified by its tribal government, an important step in ensuring its community recognition and endurance.
- White Earth Nation is also dealing with other risk behaviors and issues within the community to address the social determinants of health, such as mental health issues and substance abuse, through community interventions.

Results:

- In May 2012, The White Earth HIV and HCV Harm Reduction Coalition held the first HCV Tribal Health Summit in the United States. The summit covered topics such as harm reduction, HCV 101, enhanced risk assessment, prescription drug abuse, coalition development, and HCV treatment options.
- In 2012, HCV screening on the reservation doubled to 513 enzyme immunoassay tests in the community of 19,000 people. Fifty-one people were diagnosed in 2012, 67 percent of whom were baby boomers. In comparison, only six HCV cases were identified in 2008.
- HCV testing rates have improved by an average of 56 percent at two STD enhanced testing sites.
From May 8-9, 2013, the White Earth HIV and HCV Harm Reduction Coalition hosted a second-annual Hepatitis C Tribal Summit with support from the Minnesota Department of Health.

Lessons Learned:

- Tribal governments provide a unique environment for health interventions.
- Minnesota Department of Health can be a valuable resource and can work successfully alongside tribal leaders such as the White Earth Nation by seeking local alliances and being conscious of cultural factors.
- Screening rates for HIV and HCV can be increased through a partnership effort with community leaders and through engagement of community members.

For more information:

Cheri Booth  
Adult Viral Hepatitis Prevention Coordinator  
Minnesota Department of Health  
cheri.booth@state.mn.us  
(651) 201-4035

ASTHO Infectious Disease  
infectiousdisease@astho.org