

Establishing Programs to Support Drug Endangered Children (DEC): Is My Community Ready?

Catching Up With COSSAP, April 2021



This article is the first in a three-part series about institutionalizing efforts to support drug endangered children (DEC) in tribal communities, produced in partnership between the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children and the National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College. Subsequent articles will focus on implementing DEC programs with buy-in from law enforcement agencies and sustaining DEC programs after they are established.

Communities and tribes across the nation are experiencing an increase in substance abuse—an ominous trend that is impacting children in many ways. Children are often the first impacted by drug activity within a community, yet the last identified and helped. Children living in homes where there is parental or caregiver substance abuse often experience abuse, neglect, and trauma themselves. But they are often not identified as being impacted and therefore are not given support through what is invariably a very difficult time.

Unfortunately, communities and tribes often try to address the problem in siloed and fragmented ways. Many do not know where to start, what direction to go, or how to make the greatest impact. Often, the first question is “Are we even ready to address this issue?”

How can communities and tribes know when they are ready to address substance abuse that is adversely impacting their most vulnerable population—their children? Community readiness for DEC programming can be determined by assessing several different factors including, but not limited to, the following:

- Level of awareness of the problem within the community and among professional stakeholders
- Whether or not the community and professionals recognize the issues within the community around substance abuse and its impact on children
- Whether or not the community and professionals see that the issue is bigger than one person or one discipline; i.e., do they see that they play a part in the problem or the solution? Or is it someone else’s fault or problem?
- Whether or not the community and professionals have already started implementing solutions or programs to address the problem
- Whether or not the community and professionals think they are ready for change

Substance abuse-related issues influence so many aspects of a community. The situation might feel overwhelming by the time the severity of the problem is recognized outside of siloed perspectives. That is where the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children (National DEC) can help.



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National DEC developed a **DEC Roadmap and Toolkit** (www.nationaldec.org/road) to help communities assess their substance abuse issues, develop a plan, and develop local efforts to protect children and create safer communities. The DEC Roadmap and Toolkit provides the foundation, structure, and guidance needed to identify the readiness of a community and professionals, raise awareness of DEC challenges, implement promising practices and tools for DEC, and develop a successful tribal DEC alliance. It also helps to institutionalize DEC efforts within a community to continue to address current and future issues once DEC support efforts are established. DEC brings professionals and communities together and encourages discussion and the identification of solutions.

The Roadmap and Toolkit's content is divided into three stages: Awareness, Implementation, and Institutionalization. The following is an in-depth look at how local stakeholders can leverage the Awareness stage to determine the level of community awareness of DEC and assess community readiness to implement DEC efforts.

The Awareness stage assists communities in developing awareness of the problem and getting them ready to start DEC efforts. This stage initiates collaboration among disciplines that have never sat at the table together to find solutions that work in their communities. The three steps can be happening simultaneously, working together, and building off one another.

1. **Training:** Brings education and awareness of substance abuse problems to a community and helps assess whether the community is ready to implement DEC efforts.
2. **Community Assessment and Data Analysis:** Draws on the supports and resources available, as well as needs and gaps. Provides concrete data from varying disciplines about substance abuse issues within the community and helps disciplines identify their sometimes-siloed efforts.
3. **Raising Community Awareness:** Helps the community understand specific circumstances arising from substance abuse in the area. Awareness is raised through distribution of pamphlets and flyers, emails, use of social media, public service announcements, and other media campaigns.

TRAINING

Training is one of the first steps in the Roadmap and Toolkit Awareness stage. The Core DEC Awareness Training brings awareness to the importance and challenges of aligning the agencies and systems responsible for preventing, intervening in, and treating substance use to change the trajectories of the lives of drug endangered children and break multigenerational cycles of abuse and neglect. The training helps to show the benefits of collaboration and addresses a common response to substance use in communities: "It's not my job, not my problem." National DEC, in collaboration with the National Criminal Justice Training Center, is able to provide this training and support technical assistance to tribal Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant and Substance

National DEC and the CSKT of Montana: Part 1

In Montana, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) of the Flathead Nation were awarded a three-year Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation grant to develop a Community Strong Drug Endangered Children Alliance. CSKT recognized the substance abuse issues that were afflicting their tribal community, and they wanted change. They were not sure whether the community was ready, but they wanted to apply for the grant and prepare the community. The awarded grant allowed CSKT to partner with the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children (National DEC) to receive training, facilitation, and technical assistance focusing on drug endangered children. This included implementing practices learned from National DEC's work across the country and receiving continued support from National DEC as CSKT built, developed, and expanded the successful CSKT Tribal Drug Endangered Children Alliance they now have. When CSKT and National DEC started this effort, the tribal community was using a very siloed approach, disciplines were not collaborating and sharing information, and children were being impacted daily by abuse of methamphetamine and other drugs. However, CSKT had passionate individuals who had faith in their tribal community and their people.

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Abuse Program (COSSAP) grantees and nongrantee tribal communities at no cost through funding provided by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Training can be requested through the COSSAP Resource Center COSSAP Resource Center: <https://www.cossapresources.org/Program/TTA>.

Trainings across different disciplines can help identify those who may or may not be ready to participate in a DEC alliance. This can help maintain momentum for those ready to participate, while acknowledging those who may need more time and/or training to achieve capacity to ensure that their DEC alliances will succeed.

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS

In parallel with training, tribal communities can also begin working on National DEC's Community Assessment Worksheet, which will assist them in identifying specific community issues that need to be addressed and existing resources required to support DEC efforts. The worksheet gathers and utilizes data already collected from various disciplines. Often in communities, data are collected and only shared within one discipline—missing the potential benefit of sharing and comparing data with other disciplines to obtain a comprehensive picture. National DEC's Community Assessment Worksheet assists in bridging this gap. Disciplines may include law enforcement, child welfare, health care providers, schools, treatment providers, and others.

The data can include:

- The number of arrests made that are substance abuse-related.
- Child removals due to substance abuse or drug activity.
- The number of babies born testing positive for illegal/legal/harmful substances.
- The number of children under the age of ten entering emergency rooms and testing positive for drugs.
- The number of overdoses.
- The number of children given Narcan due to drug ingestion.

Other information may include the resources available within the community, gaps in services and resources, and current policies and laws/codes that pertain to substance abuse.

The idea is to gather data that are relevant to showing the impact that substance abuse is having on the community and its people, as well as showing what activities are already taking place within the community to address the issue.

Once data are gathered, a brief, easy-to-read report is created to be disseminated widely. This report will help obtain buy-in, provide relevant information that is irrefutable, and energize those who are already interested. This report can also be used to assist in obtaining funding down the road.

National DEC and the CSKT of Montana: Part 2

National DEC assisted CSKT in completing a community assessment using National DEC's Community Assessment Worksheet. They gathered data from tribal police, the Polson Police Department (non-tribal police), tribal child welfare, local (non-tribal) medical hospitals, tribal treatment and services providers, and others. Gathering the data took longer than expected because of trust issues between agencies as well as between tribal and non-tribal entities. CSKT also gathered information through surveys at meetings, trainings, and other events. Through this process, National DEC and CSKT learned that the community was ready for change for its children but that they needed to know more about the risks and long-term impacts. They also learned that many resources were not being utilized in their community.

Along with the community assessment, community and professional surveys should be developed and sent out. These more specific questions can provide insights as to how a community feels about what you are trying to do. National DEC recommends conducting several surveys over a period of time that can be answered anonymously through a Google Doc or other type of data gathering system. This will allow people to submit answers honestly and provide feedback that would not otherwise be available. A sample survey question may be "On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being 'Strongly Agree' and 1 being 'Strongly Disagree':

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- Professionals in my community collaborate with multiple disciplines.
- Substance abuse is a problem in my community.
- Children are impacted by caregiver or parental substance abuse in my community.
- My community is addressing issues around drug endangered children.
- My community wants help in addressing issues around drug endangered children.
- I am ready to get involved and help in DEC efforts in my community.

Sending the surveys to a wide variety of professionals and community members is ideal. Often, communities must think outside the box as to how to get people to complete and/or return surveys. Specific strategies may include having the survey available at an already-scheduled event, offering an incentive to complete the survey, or asking tribal councils and leaders to encourage others to take the survey.

While information is compiled and analyzed, National DEC encourages the use of National DEC's Identifying Key Disciplines & Individuals to Assist DEC Initiatives Worksheet. This resource helps to identify those who should be included in the DEC alliance and those who have the skills, access, knowledge, and experience necessary to enable the alliance to address the issues identified in the assessment.

All of these steps will help in identifying where the community and professionals are on the issues surrounding substance abuse in their community. They will also initiate forward momentum to build on community strengths and values that already exist, fill any gaps that have been identified, and enable stakeholders to come together to make the community a safer place for children and families.

RAISING COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Raising community awareness of substance abuse is often the next step but is also a continuous process. There are many avenues that can be taken to provide information to the community. These include conducting trainings, hosting town hall meetings, distributing pamphlets and flyers, sending out emails, posting information on social media, developing online training, creating public service announcements, and utilizing billboards and signs. The idea is that people absorb information differently and at different times; therefore, you must be adaptable by leveraging multiple channels to get information out there and at a variety of times.

National DEC and the CSKT of Montana: Part 3

CSKT provided a lot of information to the tribal community in various forms. They started by conducting the Core DEC trainings for many disciplines across the reservation and surrounding communities.

CSKT also developed pamphlets and one-pagers utilizing National DEC's format and examples.

CSKT played a radio ad that National DEC created and put up billboards, in order to get people's attention and inform them of drug endangered children.

CSKT surveyed the community to see where they needed to fill gaps and to determine how engaged the community was in efforts.

All of these helped in meeting the community where it was to move DEC forward in a way that fit this community.

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National DEC meets communities where they are. Some communities are in the initial stages, where there is no awareness and nothing is being done to address the problems. In comparison, some communities are in more final stages of readiness and may already have made community members aware, provided some training, implemented DEC promising practices, and gotten many people involved. Most communities are somewhere in between these two stages. Either way, National DEC will assist communities in working their way through the DEC Roadmap and Toolkit and setting up DEC efforts in a way that works for them. This is not a cookie-cutter approach; rather, it is tailored to each community to meet its needs in a way that considers culture, community-specific issues, previous work within the community, current work within the community, and the people themselves.



National DEC and the CSKT of Montana: Footnote

A few important points to note about CSKT:

- **CSKT conducted several professional and community surveys, learning more information from each.**
- **Their level of community awareness increased through marketing campaigns and outreach and continual trainings.**
- **The community acknowledged its substance abuse problems and, more important, appreciated the solutions being offered through the CSKT Tribal DEC Alliance; community members were engaged and wanted to be part of the movement.**