

# *Northwest New Mexico*

Gallup, New Mexico



## *Healthy Nations Program*

July 1997 – July 2000



## **“Tag Team Prevention: From Fighting Back to Healthy Nations”**

### Northwest New Mexico Narrative

#### Historical Context:

The Northwest New Mexico Fighting Back Healthy Nations (FBHN) Initiative served the greater McKinley County area as well as parts of Cibola and San Juan counties in northwestern New Mexico. An area of approximately 15,144 square miles of high desert, this region is larger than Maryland and Delaware combined. Supporting the largest concentration of localized Native American populations in the United States, the cultural diversity and geography of this catchment region posed challenges and opportunity for the Healthy Nations program. Six different Native languages are spoken among the four Native American Nations—Zuni, Laguna, Acoma, and Navajo. The Navajo Nation, which is the largest Native American group, and the Pueblo of Zuni, one of the most isolated Native groups, combined with the strong Hispanic culture create a diverse cultural mixture demanding expert coordination and negotiation skills.

Each Nation, as well as their individual communities, offers different services, presides over different jurisdictions, and interacts with multiple federal and state agencies. No centralized governmental system or representative body acts as a voice or legislative quorum for all groups and communities. This poses a significant challenge to organizing and executing a broad prevention and social change initiative. For decades efforts to build coalitions have met with varied degrees of success. Competing needs, different philosophies, and historical

tensions have created numerous systems of services, intersecting many times only under duress and forced necessity.

Known in the late 1980s as the “Drunk City,” Gallup—the largest metropolitan center and hub of activity for this region—reported alcohol-related deaths at three times that of the surrounding state and six times that of the United States. Numerous surveys and research projects confirmed the negative depiction and unacceptable statistics. Many indicators demonstrated the dire circumstances existing in this region. Reservation poverty levels reached the 75 percent level. In McKinley County inadequate financial resources addressing public intoxication compounded the growing human cost. Northwest New Mexico was suffering an alcohol-related social blight, unknown elsewhere in the United States. Student surveys at the time outlined the usual indicators of negative outcomes: 67 percent of youth under 21 dropped out of school; 63 percent considered themselves chronic substance abusers; 84 percent used substances during their twelfth grade of high school; and of those reporting, 61 percent of twelfth graders believed alcohol and drugs were major problems at school (County Alcohol Problem Indicators, NIAAA and Kid Counts).

This tri-county area, home to 11 percent of New Mexico’s population, was also overrepresented on other negative statewide social indicators such as murder (14%), fatal crashes (22%), alcohol-related deaths (20%), and alcohol-related crimes (24%). These statistics, as cited in their proposal and numerous other sources, indicated use of alcohol and substances as a leading cause of social decline and human problems. In response to growing concern and

increasing negative impact on the communities, a coalition of governments—including tribal organizations and private citizens—commissioned a needs assessment and strategic plan to deal with the problem of alcohol and drug misuse.

With the impetus to change their reputation, leaders and citizens of Gallup as well as other governments, including those from the Native American Nations, began dialogues and public meetings to muster forces to stem the tide of destruction caused by alcohol and drugs. A confluence of events, some positive and some tragic, initiated the creation of the context within which Healthy Nations grew. In 1987, in response to growing concern about the treatment of the public inebriates and the use of “drunk tanks,” a committee was formed to investigate more humane treatment for these chronic substance users. In 1988 the Gallup City Council resolved to support a closure of drive-up window liquor sales and to initiate an optional local excise tax on alcohol. This started a counter movement by the strong liquor lobby and proprietors resulting in tension that was present until 1992, at times interrupting the progress of the change.

The Council of Governments, a group commissioned by Gallup’s mayor, continued to hold public meetings to address the alcohol problem. Public attention as well as state government awareness followed a six-part series in the *Albuquerque Tribune*, “Gallup: The Town Drunk.” Other reports followed from national and state sources. The lid was off the secret of one of the worst alcohol problems in America.

In early 1989, a galvanizing event happened when a drunk driving incident took the life of three-month-old Jovita. In response, the mayor and local leaders planned and launched a 200-mile walk to the capital to garner support to legislate and address the spate of tragedies and social costs in the region. One hundred and fifty people began the twenty-mile-a-day trek, reaching the steps of the Capital seventeen days later as a throng of 2,000. The political outcome was a referendum for McKinley County to place excise taxes on liquor, laws to shut drive-up window sales of liquor, and a U.S. Congressional appropriation for a new alcohol crisis facility—Na'nizhoozhi Center. In 1990 the excise taxes were implemented, a regional alcohol summit was held, and Northwest New Mexico received one of fourteen planning grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, entitled "Fighting Back."

Fighting Back was a RWJF grant released to support mostly intercity areas addressing substance-related issues. New Mexico was the only rural recipient of the fourteen original Fighting Back sites. (Much has been published concerning this program. I refer the reader to such sources, especially those on the RWJF website). The Healthy Nations Initiative followed and built on Fighting Back.

In 1992 the Northwest New Mexico Fighting Back initiative was funded for 3 million dollars over five years. Focusing on community mobilization, public information awareness, and the provision of technical support to diverse community groups and organizations, Fighting Back established itself as an unbiased resource to address the alcohol problem in varied venues. It offered

support for the new alcohol crisis center, organized leadership summits and work sessions to brainstorm solutions, and advocated and lent support for governmental changes, including the excise tax and sales limitation on alcohol. In short, Fighting Back was the forum and moderator of the growing public conversation about alcohol problems.

Fighting Back helped to change the course of McKinley County and offered resources and support to those struggling, either personally or politically, with alcohol- and drug-related issues. The statistics are impressive and convincing. (Please refer to the publication: “The Latest View” copyrighted in 1999.)

In 1997 as the funding for Fighting Back was closing out, the Healthy Nations Initiative—a more targeted Native American substance abuse grant from Robert Wood Johnson—was just beginning Phase II Implementation at thirteen sites across the United States. The Fighting Back staff and representatives of Robert Wood Johnson felt that transitioning this successful program into the Healthy Nations family would solidify the gains and extend the positive aspects of the existing program. By invitation, Fighting Back prepared and submitted a Phase II Implementation proposal.

#### Phase I:

New Mexico did not participate in the Healthy Nations Phase I process. It was actively involved with the Fighting Back Initiative from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The HNI Phase I intention of planning and development of strategies

to address substance abuse in Native American communities had been satisfied by the five years of Fighting Back. The structures, processes, and activities of Fighting Back more than adequately served to delineate the problems, generate partial solutions, and mobilize coalitions of concerned groups and individuals. The groundwork for Healthy Nations was well-established. The NPO and NAC all concluded that inclusion of New Mexico was in the best interest of the overall project. The proposal was accepted and Northwest New Mexico Fighting Back became a member of Healthy Nations.

#### Transition:

The transition from Fighting Back to Healthy Nations required tribal sanction and governance but was rather seamless. The executive director of Fighting Back left her post at the end of funding, and the director of Na'nizoozhi Center, an active member of Fighting Back, became the executive director of the nonprofit Northwest New Mexico Fighting Back, Inc. With support from the partner agencies and coalitions of governmental and private leaders, he moved systematically to extend the life of Fighting Back with Healthy Nations funds. The shift in both staff and philosophy was minimal and consisted of minor adjustments.

Healthy Nations exhibited more structured programming components that addressed substance abuse, and it encouraged more individual and direct community support. The RWJ grant components were adequately addressed in the Fighting Back Healthy Nations (FBHN) proposal. All other difficulties

experienced by Healthy Nations sites, such as reporting and financial accounting, had previously been resolved, leaving the staff to act in the identified communities. FBHN took its place among the thirteen other sites in stride and with little disruption in the trajectory of the previous five years.

## Phase II:

Fighting Back planned to participate in the communities in a more intense and specific manner. The structure of the FBHN was to have coordinators in each of six communities. These communities—Shiprock, Counselor, Crownpoint, Acoma, Laguna and Tohatchi—represented population centers from the three Native American nations. These coordinators worked with the local governments, leaders, Elders, and organizations in garnering support for prevention and public awareness activities. The process was to utilize local community action teams in strengthening local ownership and empowering the community to act against the problems created by substance abuse. Listening and coalition-building were the main requirements for the coordinators. Each needed to demonstrate the ability to bring together and balance the different needs and interests as well as mobilize the community.

During the first year, Crownpoint, experienced the only change in personnel created from these requirements. Another coordinator, well-known to the community, was quickly appointed by the community and maintained the objectives with no discernable delay. Acoma was deliberate in appointing a coordinator. In maintaining the self-directed philosophy of the community

listening model, the leadership of Acoma pondered the qualifications and “fit” of the coordinator and made its choice toward the end of year one. An anticipated change in personnel happened in 1998 when the assistant director from Fighting Back transitioned to another position outside Healthy Nations. However, this person remained active in the Fighting Back programs through voluntary support. No other personnel changes occurred in the execution of Phase II.

Since specific community help had not been the mainstay of Fighting Back, the first year of Healthy Nations was focused on creating a mechanism to hear the community members and mobilize their resources. Community meetings, participation in community council meetings, and direct solicitation of feedback from community members became the method of listening and planning. Other early efforts included bringing in Boy and Girls Clubs as alternative activities to substance use. This objective was successfully realized in two communities. Coordinators facilitated public awareness campaigns by offering technical support, materials and ideas for posters, staffing at booths for community gatherings, and leadership and skills trainings. The staff at the Na'nizoozih Center served as focal point for technical support, helping to train the coordinators in using laptop computers and inspiring cultural and traditional treatment and aftercare alternatives. The first year was one of discovery and the initiation of locally staffed action teams. The response was positive and the energy and power of Fighting Back grew.

As the coordinators gained experience and were faced with demands and opportunities, the need to have Healthy Nations support was apparent. The

director organized bi-weekly meetings so the coordinators could share ideas and concerns, gain support, and cross-train. The demands of the catchment area made the efforts to gather together all the more challenging. Having to drive long distances on less-than-ideal roadways placed a burden on the staff. Compensation and accommodations of travel demands necessitated a budget revision that met with little comment from the NPO.

In the second year, the National Program Office held a site visit. Stimulated, in part, by concerns about reporting requirements which included increased specifics on the reports, the tenor of the site visit was supportive and demonstrated a genuine concern from the national office about Fighting Back. This went a long way toward bolstering the program and, combined with participation at the grantee meetings by some of the coordinators, solidified Fighting Back's place in the family of Healthy Nations.

The exchange of ideas and technical assistance grew between other sites and Fighting Back. Although the incorporation of such ideas was not readily apparent, the overarching philosophy of listening to the communities and the universal experience of other Healthy Nations sites in the political arenas helped this program blossom.

Toward the end of the funding of Healthy Nations, Fighting Back had successfully institutionalized many of their activities. The requirement to garner community support including material resources and personal commitments had borne fruit. For example, communities established and sponsored Boys and Girls Clubs. The Joey Harry Memorial Run and The Red Ribbon Multicultural Relay

Run, involving hundreds in the Shiprock area, are now sponsored by the local government and organizations. The Counselor coordinator assisted the community to petition to close three liquor establishments. Two of the outlets were closed and the third was under pressure from members of the local community and state agencies. Acoma had mobilized the community to exert pressure on Wal-Mart to severely restrict alcohol sales. Wal-Mart responded to the community by significantly limiting liquor access. Crownpoint organized a network of providers and service agencies to address alcohol-related issues such as domestic violence. The community and local organizations now sponsor youth sporting activities, and they regularly petition local authorities to limit the availability of alcohol and other substances.

Coalition building and the transfer of responsibility and sponsorship of prevention and public awareness to community authorities and members highlighted the last year of Healthy Nations. The Na'nizhoozhi Center maintained a strong relationship with state and local governments, expanding their services and gaining further funding through grants and legislative appropriations. The Center established itself as a source of traditional and cultural programming. The philosophy and activities of the Center have been copied and instituted throughout the national treatment network, and prevention and public awareness have carried the message embraced by the Center and staff.

The Healthy Nations communities created avenues for returning Center clients. They carried the spirit and healing philosophy, further strengthening the impact of Fighting Back. The original Fighting Back and community initiative to

tax the sale of alcohol and funnel the money into prevention and services has routinely been supported by voter approval nearly five-to-one. This formed a foundation for sustainability for the Center and, therefore, the spirit of Fighting Back.

Personnel and associated individuals remain an asset in the region. The Counselor coordinator was elected to the position of community (chapter) president. The project secretary was hired by the state as a prevention specialist, and the other coordinators remain in their communities helping to heal the damage of substance abuse. Ideas and activities became institutional. The Acoma Healthy Nations programs were folded into their new Drug Elimination program, while Tohatchi spun off three nonprofit organizations initially sponsored and supported by Healthy Nations. The reach of Fighting Back and the extension afforded through Healthy Nations proved the recipe for success and change.

#### Highlights:

Many positive things grew from Healthy Nations on the successes of Fighting Back. The longevity of the combined program as well as the stable leadership and strong coalitions made this program site successful. One project that supports this is the New Year's Eve dance, now in its tenth year. Sponsored as an alternative to other dangerous and drunken parties, Fighting Back set out to change the face of New Year's Eve. The efforts of Healthy Nations in promoting sobriety and in energizing the communities through school curricula, youth sport activities, and open public dialogue has forced this activity to larger

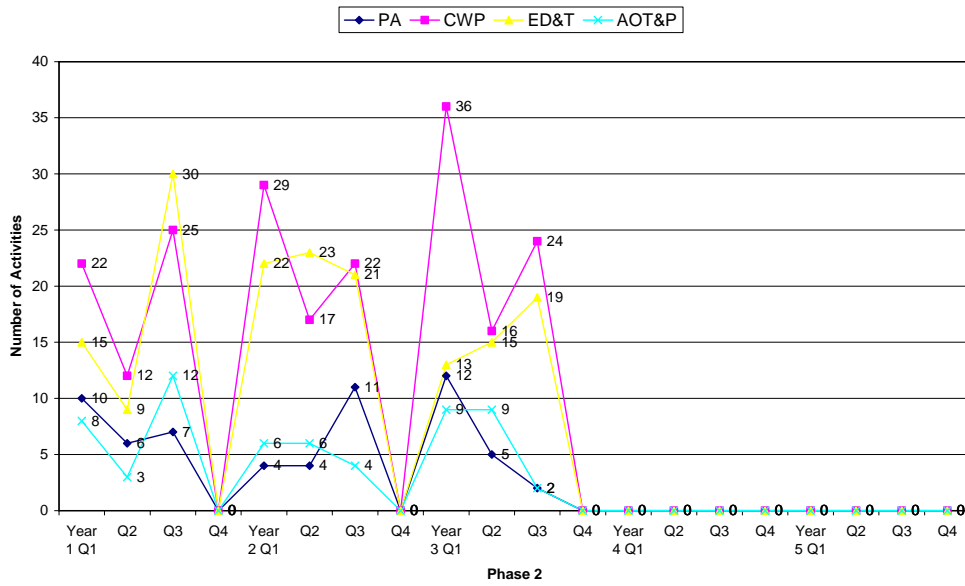
and larger venues due to overwhelming response. From humble beginnings with about a hundred people to the current nearly 900 participants, this sober and wellness event epitomizes the Healthy Nations intent.

Public awareness and action have resulted in clear and measurable outcomes. One such project was getting the department of transportation and tribal governments to petition for widening and illuminating a stretch of road better known as the “death strip.” With persistence and Healthy Nations support activating the coalitions and organizations, this was finally accomplished resulting in a significant decline in deaths along this stretch of freeway. Combined with the referendums to tax the sale of alcohol, close Gallup’s drive-through-window liquor sales, and petitions closing bars and liquor establishments in many communities, the long history of Fighting Back has produced results that have created a better now and brighter future for those living in this region.

Personnel continue to be an asset that remains viable and active. The director and coordinators are all still active (2003) in the communities and the political arena. Chapter presidents, state commission leaders, coordinators of youth programs, clinical staff, and coalition facilitators are just a few of the positions currently held by those taught and supported by Healthy Nations. The philosophy of listening is still the standard. Limited funds and the period of funding restricted the number of communities that were able to be served and would have benefited from Fighting Back Healthy Nations. The number of volunteers and leaders who gathered to support activities, participate in trainings,

and petition the government rose in a timely manner and continue to promote change and offer hope.

### NorthWest New MexicoActivities



**Key:** PA = public awareness  
 CWP = community-wide prevention  
 ED&T = early identification and treatment  
 AOT&P = accessible options for treatment and relapse prevention

