

# UNDERSTANDING TRIBAL GOVERNANCE

*Tips for Working with Tribes on Tobacco Policy Issues*



This tool is intended for those seeking to work with tribal communities advocating for commercial tobacco-related policy issues. It provides a brief overview of the tribal governance structures and some of the factors that can influence the engagement process. Working with tribes often looks different than working with a city council or board of supervisors. Familiarity with Native American history and tribal governance structures is crucial for success.



## FACTS ABOUT TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

For the first time, the California Department of Public Health's Tobacco Control Program has directly funded tribes to conduct their own commercial tobacco control-related projects. Tribal communities are joining the fight far later than many other populations in California and are often in the early phases of capacity building.

- ❖ **109 federally recognized tribes** in California, in addition to two others that hold territory that crosses state lines.
- ❖ **Tribes are sovereign nations** with the right to self-govern and are not under state jurisdiction.

- ❖ **Tribes control how services** are administered to their people.
- ❖ **Tribal governments vary in structure.** Each tribe creates its own constitution, determines electoral procedures, and defines criteria for tribal enrollment. Changes in administration can dramatically shift tribal priorities and procedures.
- ❖ **Tribal communities are engaging** in economic development. Consider the potential social, political, and economic impact activities may have on the community. Smoke shops and gaming facilities provide important revenue and sociopolitical power that has not existed before.



## HISTORY AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA

It is important to take time and learn about Native American history and historical trauma. Tribes may have some commonalities, but they are unique in many ways. It is not uncommon to encounter resistance when initially approaching a tribe, so it is essential to understand some of the reasons why there may be mistrust or hesitancy in working with an “outsider.”

- ❖ **Take the time to learn** about each tribe’s history and culture. For example, organize a one-on-one meeting with a member of the tribe to learn about the history of the tribe you will be working with.
- ❖ **Do not assume policies** can be transferred from one tribe to another.

- ❖ **Tribes are attempting to reclaim** their traditions after experiencing extensive loss of culture, land, and people.
- ❖ **Commercial tobacco** and traditional tobacco are not the same. Understand the difference and demonstrate respect for traditional use.
- ❖ **Mistrust is often present** and serves as a protective factor. Tribes have been targeted and harmed by the policies and actions of the federal government, outside organizations, and many individuals throughout history.
- ❖ **Understand why mistrust exists** and take time to build personal relationships and establish an acceptable level of comfort.



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANIZING

Once you have learned about tribal governance structure and about Native American history and historical trauma you will be ready to start organizing. Some organizing skills to consider:

- ❖ **Be flexible and adaptable.** Be willing to incorporate traditional values and tribal priorities into the approach.
- ❖ **Consider varying perspectives.** Differences in norms can influence perceptions and lead to misunderstanding. Ask for clarification as often as needed.

- ❖ **Be patient.** Relationship building is an important investment and can take additional time and attention.
- ❖ **Show humility and be respectful.** It can be beneficial to admit limited knowledge and ask for guidance.
- ❖ **Communicate early and often** to ensure an equitable, collaborative process.
- ❖ **Be very flexible** in your approach and be prepared to adjust expectations.
- ❖ **Informal listening sessions** and opportunities for idea-sharing can establish trust and create a more effective means of communication.



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