

“Point of Death’ HIV/AIDS & IV Drug Use Youth Awareness Video Project

Gary Adkins, Education and Training Consultant

Introduction:

Alcohol and other abuses have had a negative affect on Aboriginal Canadians as a whole. Across Canada, information, personnel, and the availability of services are at fairly close range for most of those wishing to utilize them. However, communities of the N.W.T are widely spread and sometimes do not have the tools necessary to cope with all issues facing them. Isolation, struggle for cultural identity, boredom, and a need to be heard, are some of the issues facing our Northern youth today. HIV/AIDS & IV Drug use, though highly prevalent in the rest of Canada, are just beginning to take a serious hold in the NWT. With the expansion of the diamond industry and the influx of people from the South, drugs are brought in, making access easier for northerners. With the increase of IV Drug use in the north, it is essential that communities be fully informed about the hazards of sharing needles. In some cases it is still difficult to get the message out that HIV/AIDS can be contracted through sexual contact.

Realizing the need for this information to reach our northern people, the Fort Smith Metis Council sought ways to work with the community youth to develop a format by which they could share this information with their peers throughout the north. As this project was aimed at youth at risk, it was felt that our community youth should be approached for interested participants. The goals of the project were as follows; work with aboriginal youth at risk in producing a peer awareness video, on IV Drug use and its relationship to HIV/AIDS & Hepatitis C and distribute copies of the video to all communities in the NWT, free of charge.

Project History:

During the fall of 1998 the Fort Smith Metis Council submitted a proposal to Health Canada, requesting funding to produce a 30-minute youth awareness video on HIV/AIDS & IV Drug use. Rationale for this project was based on the idea that youth understand and listen to youth better than they do adults. This project would provide participating youth with a project over which they could have artistic and information control. The original proposal requested \$50,000.00 to produce this video. Health Canada responded by funding the council \$75,000.00 to ensure we had adequate funding to complete the project.

The councils' Education & Training manager's role, was to produce the video. He had produced two previous videos: one dealing with teenage sexual assault and another on teen suicide. As well, he has worked with youth for several years in various capacities; for example as an alcohol counselor, youth program counselor and facilitator of suicide intervention workshops as far north as Grise Fiord on Ellesmere Island.

The project began in October, with a call for community youth interested in forming a research team. Four youth were chosen to research the aspects of IV Drug use and its relation to HIV/AIDS. A local drama instructor was employed to work with the youth and the producer on development of the video. A local high school student was employed as co-producer to work closely with the youth and production crew. While the team gathered information, auditions for actors were held at the PW Kaeser high school. Fourteen youth showed up to audition for the main characters and supporting roles. The youth were given a script to read, and interviewed on their knowledge of HIV/AIDS. They were marked on posture, clarity and voice projection. A letter describing the project was sent to all parents along with a permission slip for them to sign allowing their child to act in the video.

The research team and actors were given information workshops on various aspects of the topic. A member of the Fort Smith RCMP detachment spoke on his experiences of working with IV drug users. Other members of the community spoke to the group as well. One speaker, a former IV user, spoke to the youth on the negative affects of using drugs in general but emphasized the added dangers of sharing needles with others. He also revealed that high risk behavior reduces the chances of a person making clear and rational decisions, which can sometimes lead people to have a careless attitude toward protecting themselves. By the end of the month, enough information was gathered to hand over to the actors so that they could begin working on the story line and script.

The first decision the group had to make was what presentation format would be the most powerful in getting the message across to their peers? It was decided to go with a documentary/ drama. This would allow various professional and community leaders to share their input while still giving the youth an opportunity to present their perspective through drama.

A professional scriptwriter traveled from Yellowknife to give the youth a two-day workshop on scripting and story development. The youth learned about the protagonist, the antagonist and how to maintain the audience's attention. He also provided them with information in a way that would make an impact on their outlook in using and sharing needles.

With enthusiasm and determination, the youth started building characters and a story line prior to scripting. How could this be written in a believable manner, so that people would realize that this topic is a serious

one that affects all of us? What facilities or community support would we require? Would the cast be using needles? If so, how do we insure safety during use? These and many more issues were discussed as the project was developed.

While the writing crew worked on their scripting, the research team developed a brochure for distribution with the video. Additionally, they made suggestions about people to be interviewed and questions to be asked. Early in 1999, two youth traveled to Yellowknife and held interviews with the already identified key informants.

During the months of January and February, the youth worked on the script diligently and enthusiastically in anticipation of the March 5th to the 9th shooting dates. Shooting began on schedule with the cast and crew ready to combine all their hard work into a project of which they would be proud. The patience and determination of the youth to get each scene right while maintaining their composure was inspiring to watch.

The Video Script

Max, a small time dealer and pimp, has HIV but does not inform anyone. He uses a needle to inject his drug of choice and shares the same needle with others.

Cynthia, a troubled teen living with her mother and brother, gets kicked out when her mother finds a bag of pot in her jeans. She finds herself on the streets, living wherever she can find a place to stay for a night or two. Meeting up with Max, he offers her a place to stay and the possibility of earning some extra cash. From there, her life goes down hill; Max turns her out to hook for him by keeping her hooked on coke.

At the parties, everyone shares the same needle with the assumption that everyone is clean. At one of the parties, a new girl tells the others about contracting HIV/AIDS through sharing of needles, both during drug use or tattooing. Cynthia has her doubts and decides to use the clean needle.

When one of the girls contracts HIV, she attempts suicide by overdosing and ends up in the hospital where Cynthia finds her. Cynthia offers her support and tells her friend, "Just because you have HIV doesn't mean you have to give up. I'm here for you."

Cynthia confronts Max about knowing he had HIV when he was sharing needles and decides to get help. After receiving counseling and attending a rehabilitation program, Cynthia moves back with her mother and brother in hopes of straightening out her life.

The police apprehend Max when he is found with coke in his van.

The Video Premiere

On April 9th, a community feast was arranged for a premier viewing of the video. Three youth from the Aurora College Pre-employment Cooking program were hired to cater the event. As this was their first catering opportunity, the youth were very excited about the chance of putting into practice what they had learned over the past year. An estimated one hundred and thirty people attended the feast and twenty nine-minute production. Presentations were made to the actors and community members who had assisted with the project prior to the viewing. Televisions were set around the hall so everyone would be in a good viewing position. The nodding heads, shed tears, comments like “I didn’t think these kids had it in them” and a standing ovation were positive indicators that the youth had produced a video with an impact that would help others with knowledge of high-risk behavior and of steps to protect themselves.

The video was shown on the community channel the same evening, which allowed community members who were unable to attend the premier to view it at home.

Outcome

In April of 1999, the youth were invited to make a presentation at the “Alberta Aboriginal AIDS Conference” being held in Calgary. The youth presented the video, discussed how the project was completed, and spoke about the need for this information to reach aboriginal youth whether they are at high-risk or not. The group had the opportunity to meet with other youth to discuss what was being addressed in their communities and exchange ideas on projects they felt were needed to bring this information to their peers. Copies of the video were handed out and names of those interested in having a copy mailed to them were taken. As the video would be free to anyone wishing a copy, we received a lot of requests. Many viewers were impressed with the production and the hard work done by the group.

Over the next few months, copies of the video were distributed across Canada, while a few more were sent to England, Australia and the US.

The Yellowknife Correctional Institute and AIDS Yellowknife have worked with the inmates in forming a peer group which utilized the video as part of their presentation to other inmates in their institution. As well, the video is distributed to correctional institutions in other communities. Upon speaking with the warden, I was informed that since the presentation of the video, they have not found any tattooing paraphernalia on the premises. Likewise, a nurse from one of the communities mentioned

she had an influx of inmates wanting to have blood tests. When asked why the sudden interest in blood test, she was told about the video presentation by the peer group.

During the production phase, several of the youth mentioned that it would be a good idea to make a CD from the video sound track. Once again, Health Canada granted funding to have a CD produced. It was decided to take one of the tracks and use it to send awareness messages in all the languages used in the North: Cree, Chipawan, North & South Slavey, Dogrib, Gwichn, Inukitut, Inuinaqtun, English and French.

Special Edition
NATIVE SOCIAL
WORK
JOURNAL

HIV/AIDS: Issues Within Aboriginal Populations

The Native Social Work Journal is a member of the Canadian
Association of Learned Journals

Volume 3, Number 1, September 2000

©2000 Native Social Work Journal

Published by the Native Social Work Journal
Laurentian University
Sudbury, Ontario
www.laurentian.ca/www/nhs/

Printed by the Laurentian University Press
Sudbury, Ontario

Cover Artwork by Leland Bell

ISSN 1206-5323
All rights reserved

NISHNAABE KINOOMAADWIN
NAADMAADWIN