

Institutionalizing Support for Drug Endangered Children in Tribal Communities: How to Sustain It in an Ever-Changing World

Catching Up With COSSAP, October 2021



This article is the last 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 DEC (National DEC) and the

*National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College. The first article, [Establishing Programs to Support Drug Endangered Children: Is My Community Ready?](#) appeared in the April 2021 issue of *Catching Up With COSSAP*. The second, [Implementing Programs to Support Drug Endangered Children \(DEC\) in Tribal Communities: Getting Buy-In From Law Enforcement](#), appeared in the August issue.*

Now that you have assessed your readiness to undertake a program to support drug endangered children (DEC) in the [awareness stage](#) and have started the [implementation stage](#), what is next? The next step is institutionalizing and sustaining your DEC efforts, because we want to do everything we can to ensure a healthy community for our children. They are our future.

What does institutionalizing efforts mean? By adding DEC support to other customary responses to substance misuse—including those by tribal law enforcement, child welfare services, and other service providers—institutionalization helps create a standard. Knowing how to identify and intervene on behalf of drug endangered children are important steps; once they are accepted as best practices and are used in all cases, DEC efforts have been institutionalized.

Tribal DEC Alliance: A Case Study

National DEC worked with a tribe, called Tribe A for this case study, to provide DEC training on its reservation. After the training, National DEC began to schedule follow-up calls to provide technical assistance (TA) for setting up a local DEC alliance. Tribe A declined the TA, thinking it did not need to formalize its efforts. After the training, Tribe A made a few changes in how child welfare organizations looked at their DEC cases, and a few law enforcement officers started looking for children during traffic stops. Police officers also reached out more regularly to child welfare services.

One year later, National DEC received an email from Tribe A asking for help again as things had not changed and DEC were becoming more prevalent and impacted more frequently. Tribe A witnessed more babies being born testing positive for illegal drugs and an increase in drug-related arrests, but services were not working together to address those needs. National DEC conducted more training, and Tribe A agreed that TA was necessary to make and sustain the changes needed. National DEC worked with Tribe A to set up a DEC alliance whose efforts were institutionalized and sustainable.

After three years of working with National DEC, Tribe A now has a tribal DEC alliance that meets regularly, active memoranda of understanding (MOUs), a community assessment and action plan, collaboration between services, and much more. Since its DEC efforts are now institutionalized, Tribe A is looking at implementing promising DEC practice tools such as Handle With Care and QR codes (see National DEC's Promising Practices for Helping Drug Endangered Children at www.nationaldec.org for more information).

Institutionalized efforts in Tribe A have helped its DEC alliance come together, address issues, and find solutions. And it will continue to do so for years to come as its efforts are now sustainable.

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Why do we want to institutionalize efforts? If DEC efforts are not institutionalized as part of everyday practice by professionals in communities, local responses to substance abuse become fragmented and are not consistent in their application or effects. This means that they will be unlikely to last and that children will continue to suffer, families will continue to be torn apart by addiction, and communities will continue to be impacted by trauma and crime. Institutionalization formalizes efforts to address issues over time, even when issues around substance misuse and addiction change down the road.

How do you institutionalize efforts? [National DEC](#) helps communities and tribes implement and sustain their DEC efforts through its DEC Roadmap and Toolkit.

During this stage, professionals, communities, and tribes can use the National DEC Roadmap and Toolkit to:

1. Continue to connect with National DEC and the [National Criminal Justice Training Center of Fox Valley Technical College](#) for information, TA, updated training opportunities, and other resources and support. DEC training and technical assistance (TTA) is available to Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) tribal grantees at no cost through Bureau of Justice Assistance-supported TTA funds and can be requested through the COSSAP Resource Center: <https://www.cossapresources.org/Program/TTA>. National DEC's website, <https://www.nationaldec.org/>, also provides many tools and resources.
2. Continue to train and raise their awareness of the issues surrounding DEC. Ongoing training is important as there are always new professionals and new community members who need information to support children.
3. Continue to provide training on the DEC approach to bringing stakeholders together to discuss a common vision, collaboration, and change as they relate to DEC.
4. Conduct local DEC development training and facilitation to assist in developing an alliance and to work through problems.
5. Have local professionals become certified DEC trainers to provide ongoing training.
6. Establish effective communications with all tribal programs, the community, and tribal leaders.
7. Institutionalize and share promising DEC practices and evaluate their effectiveness. This may include the development of protocols (see National DEC's Protocol Development Worksheet at <https://www.nationaldec.org/institutionalization>); bylaws; and MOUs.
8. Work with leaders on policy support as it pertains to DEC efforts. This could be in the form of tribal resolutions or legislation.
9. Conduct regular meetings with the multidisciplinary alliance to develop rules, agendas, and subcommittees as necessary; identify goals and objectives; develop solutions; and address issues that arise in order to sustain progress.
10. Continue to assess DEC efforts on all levels to maintain effectiveness and safety for children and families.

Benefits of Institutionalized DEC Efforts:

- Provide a foundation for responding to challenges facing DEC
- Provide a framework for responding effectively to issues that may arise down the road
- Provide long-term solutions instead of short-term reactions
- Build trust across disciplines and throughout the community
- Increase support not only for professionals but also children and families

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What does this all mean for my community/tribe?

Institutionalization means that DEC efforts within a tribal community *are possible*. It is possible to respond effectively to challenges facing DEC on an ongoing basis. It is possible to bring disciplines together on a long-term basis. It is possible to work collaboratively on every level to effect change for children and their families. Not only can you influence change now; by institutionalizing efforts and thereby making them sustainable, the impact of your work will continue for years to come.

National DEC's work with Tribe A's DEC alliance (see case study on first page) helped institutionalize its efforts in several ways. First, MOUs were developed and signed between agencies to formalize efforts. Second, tribal DEC alliances were formed that brought numerous disciplines and leaders together on a regular basis. National DEC helped Tribe A complete a tribal action plan that contained both short- and long-term goals and objectives. At each DEC alliance meeting, the group discussed progress toward goals and next steps. When issues arose, DEC alliance members helped to work through them and find solutions that fit the tribe and community. The continued progress of the DEC alliance toward its goals brought a sense of accomplishment to the group and the tribe. Utilizing the Roadmap and Toolkit, National DEC walked the alliance through the steps needed to become a successful, functioning tribal DEC alliance.

Institutionalizing DEC efforts in tribal communities can be challenging at times due to several factors, including staff turnover (including those in leadership roles) and limited staffing and resources to keep up with regular workloads while trying to maintain the momentum of DEC initiatives. One way to overcome these challenges is to document DEC efforts by:

- Ensuring that MOUs between stakeholder agencies are concluded.
- Memorializing practices and incorporating them as policies.
- Tracking DEC alliance membership.
- Developing meeting agendas and keeping meeting minutes.

It is important to include these steps as part of a tribal action plan or as part of a DEC alliance's goals and objectives. A history of where you came from and how you got there can be valuable to a DEC alliance, especially for succeeding generations of alliance members.

We hope this three-part series provided a practical foundation as you move toward helping change the trajectory of children's lives and breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect.

