

Implementing Programs to Support Drug Endangered Children in Tribal Communities: Getting Buy-In From Law Enforcement

Catching Up With COSSAP, August 2021



This article is the second 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 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 third article will focus on sustaining DEC programs after they are established.

Once a community or tribe has started training and raising awareness about DEC, what strategies can be used to bring people to the table? More specifically, how is buy-in from law enforcement agencies obtained? These are real questions asked and concerns faced by many communities.

Let us start with understanding more about DEC efforts to build collaborative relationships between disciplines and, most importantly, having law enforcement involved as a key stakeholder.

Evolution of DEC Efforts

DEC efforts began years ago with a focus on saving children from exposure to harmful chemicals produced by methamphetamine labs. Law enforcement officers usually responded to these cases and, if children were present, were assisted by child welfare social workers. Children were often removed from dangerous environments while offenders were referred to prosecutors and courts for criminal charges. This approach provided children who were living in dangerous

drug homes with a safe living environment and medical care at a perilous time, ideally before there was an explosion, chemical ingestion or chemical exposure, or overdose. But times have changed. Today, there are fewer meth labs, while use of heroin, fentanyl and other opioids, marijuana, and alcohol has become more frequent, impacting children in different ways. In response, DEC efforts have evolved, with the overall goal of ensuring the safety and well-being of children across the nation. These changes include:

1. Inviting more disciplines to participate in DEC efforts.
2. Expanding the risk spectrum of youth exposed to drugs, substance misuse, and other risky drug activity.
3. Understanding that identification of DEC can come from any discipline.
4. Understanding the impact on children of all activities associated with drugs and other substances.

DEC efforts now involve representatives from all disciplines, including law enforcement officers, child welfare providers, fire/emergency medical services personnel, judicial staff members, medical personnel, teachers and school personnel, service providers, treatment facility providers, and many more. The overarching belief is that the more people involved and educated about DEC, the more likely that children who are at risk will be identified. DEC efforts are no longer a reactive response; they are proactive, beginning with education and progressing to the identification of children at risk or in need, provision of intervention and other services, and support for children and their families.

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Role of Law Enforcement

So where do law enforcement agencies fit in and why are they essential to DEC efforts? First, law enforcement officers often encounter children and families during their most vulnerable moments, which may serve as opportunities to provide help. But officers also see children and families in situations that many other disciplines are not able to see. For example, they may enter a house with a search warrant and observe several people injecting drugs with needles; they may see a couple passed out on the floor in the bedroom while their children play video games in the living room. Following such encounters, law enforcement officers are able to provide information and evidence, including pictures, videos, and interviews, to other disciplines. This information subsequently enables community service disciplines to intervene and provide services that are best able to help children and families.

Case Study, Part One: CSKT Tribal DEC Alliance

In Montana, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) Tribal DEC Alliance leader, Melanie Smith, was able to develop relationships with the different police agencies around the reservation by going in person and talking about drug problems and how they were affecting children. She shared the impacts that drug problems were having on the reservation and invited officers to meetings with the DEC Alliance and community stakeholders. By attending meetings, officers could see how disciplines were working together, how they identified gaps, and helped one another to come up with effective responses to challenges. As new law enforcement officers came to the table, they could see firsthand the effectiveness of the alliance. Even though they were new or not yet officially members, they could share their issues and concerns and get ideas and direction from the alliance, producing better outcomes for children and the community.

Law enforcement officers hold the key to gathering and collecting drug use and drug-related data within the community. Law enforcement data can be used to assess community needs and develop strategic plans to create comprehensive and community-based tribal responses, which, in turn, can serve as the basis for a strong tribal DEC alliance. A tribal DEC alliance is able to define protocols around what types of information may be shared with its members, institutionalizing confidentiality through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and partner agreements.

Law enforcement officers also provide a different perspective on how the community and children are impacted and can suggest a variety of ideas about how to solve the problems. They can also provide support to service providers who are entering homes that may be dangerous.

So, the tough question is, what is the best way to engage tribal law enforcement agencies in DEC efforts in order to make substantive changes that benefit children and their families?

DEC Approach Training

The National Alliance for DEC uses the DEC Roadmap and Toolkit (www.nationaldec.org/road) to assist communities and tribes in getting buy-in from different disciplines, including law enforcement. The DEC Roadmap and Toolkit is divided into three stages: awareness, implementation, and institutionalization. Let us focus on the implementation stage, which addresses barriers to obtaining buy-in from stakeholders to support development and implementation of solutions to support DEC. The implementation stage encourages professionals and communities to move from awareness to action. This action piece comprises DEC Approach Training; identifying, developing, and implementing DEC promising practices; engaging leadership and stakeholders even when that becomes difficult; and disseminating information to others. This stage is also the start of the process of bringing together a small group of professionals to serve as a DEC alliance. As a

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result, tribal law enforcement officers will have experience and understanding working with cultural and traditional practices—valuable knowledge for a tribal DEC alliance. The officers will benefit from established relationships with tribal leaders and can invite them to trainings and meetings.

The DEC Approach Training was developed to help address the challenges and the needs of DEC. This training outlines a multidisciplinary strategy designed to change the trajectory of a child’s life through recognition of a common vision; ongoing collaboration between disciplines, as well as with community members; and ongoing changes in practices, policies, and other changes intended to increase the likelihood of better outcomes for DEC. The DEC Approach trains practitioners to form community-based partnerships across multiple disciplines and to effectively collaborate according to their mutual interests, resources, and responsibilities.

This is a stage when communities will begin to look at developing promising practices (or utilizing existing ones). These may include the development and/or utilization of checklists, publications, and tools that assist disciplines in their current jobs. The National Alliance for DEC has developed many of these resources to assist communities in their implementation efforts.

At this point, it is important to start engaging leadership and stakeholders to begin the institutionalization stage of DEC efforts. Making a list of potential partners and advocates for DEC efforts is important. By now, many stakeholders should already be involved, but there might be other disciplines that have not been engaged that will be important moving forward. This is the stage to brainstorm ideas regarding getting those disciplines involved. Here are some questions to consider when it comes to engaging tribal law enforcement:

Case Study, Part Two: CSKT Tribal DEC Alliance

The CSKT Tribal DEC Alliance continued conversations with law enforcement frequently, talking about ongoing DEC concerns. This created opportunities for different disciplines and law enforcement agencies to see the alliance in action and participate in local trainings. For those who were not completely on board with the alliance, trainings were a game changer. Through support from a nearby city in Montana, many law enforcement officers were sent to the National Alliance for DEC national conference. There, these officers were able to gain insight into the trauma-informed approach of DEC efforts. The conference helped provide the awareness and education needed for officers to become fully committed to the CSKT DEC Alliance’s efforts.

1. Why do you want law enforcement involved in DEC efforts? What can they bring to the table? How can DEC efforts benefit from their involvement? Showing law enforcement officers how efforts would benefit from their involvement will be important. Developing tribal community-specific materials, such as pamphlets or infographics, to demonstrate how law enforcement can participate in the program will be helpful. Officers may not understand how they can assist, so explain how their evidence and information can benefit other disciplines and how sharing information can provide insight for other disciplines to be able to help at-risk children.
2. How can law enforcement benefit from getting involved? Showing law enforcement how they can benefit should help in obtaining their buy-in. Explain what is in it for them: preserving culture and traditional tribal values; accessing information from other disciplines for their own cases and investigations; developing partnerships with more agencies that can assist their investigations; helping more children by helping other disciplines; getting children help and intervention earlier; and stopping the multigenerational cycles of substance abuse as well as child abuse and neglect.

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3. What is it you would like them to do? Everyone who gets involved will need to know what is expected of them and how they can help. This might be in the form of sharing information and evidence with other disciplines, having someone assigned to sit on the DEC alliance, signing an MOU for a response protocol, or developing tools to assist children and families. These will be community-specific, depending on local needs.

Conclusion

As should be clear now, law enforcement officers can bring significant value to a DEC alliance, which, in turn, affords better protection for children, based on early recognition of problems and intervention for children and families. Take the time to educate and include law enforcement officers in DEC trainings and efforts. When they see and understand that DEC alliances embody the philosophy of “I make you stronger and you make me stronger,” their buy-in will be quick to come, and the community will benefit from the collaboration of all disciplines.

The National Alliance for DEC, in partnership with the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College, is able to provide training and technical assistance (TTA) to tribal COSSAP grantees and non-grantee tribal communities that are ready to implement the DEC Approach. The National Alliance for DEC and NCJTC are also able to provide technical assistance to tribes needing assistance with achieving law enforcement buy-in and multidisciplinary and community stakeholder engagement. TTA services are available at no cost through COSSAP TTA funding provided by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and can be requested through the COSSAP Resource Center at <https://www.cossapresources.org/Program/TTA>.

