

# HOPE INITIATIVE

Evaluation report



## Executive summary

Blue Cross® and Blue Shield® of Minnesota created the Healing Our People Everywhere (HOPE) initiative which supports ten organizations and Tribal Nations working to eliminate the widespread disparities in commercial tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure among communities facing adverse social and health outcomes. It also cultivates healing and cultural well-being in Indigenous and other communities targeted by the commercial tobacco industry.

## Successes

HOPE-funded projects used their resources wisely to expand reach, engage communities, and create positive change. Together, they...

- hired 50+ staff
- partnered with eight experts
- engaged 43 volunteers

REACHING  
MORE THAN **22,000**  
PARTICIPANTS



Projects increased knowledge about the harms of commercial tobacco and the cultural importance of sacred tobacco, especially through culturally rooted education and events.

HOPE participants reported high satisfaction with their experiences — 67% felt very satisfied — and many began making healthier choices, including quitting smoking, improving nutrition, and increasing physical activity. Additionally, cultural teaching helped strengthen family ties, revive traditions, and reconnect generations.

**“One of the successes is that people are interested in hearing about these issues. This wasn’t the case before. When we started in January, people weren’t as receptive, but now, whether at church or in other communities, there’s genuine interest.”**

– Sub-Saharan African Youth and Family Services of Minnesota team member

## About the authors

Blue Cross hired Golden Light, a team comprised of Lighthouse Global and Golden Aspen Consulting, to lead the HOPE evaluation. The team designed a participatory, culturally responsive evaluation process that included a literature review, design workshops, and data collection through interviews, surveys, focus groups, talking circles, and arts-based methods. The evaluation assessed implementation and outcomes across ten projects, focusing on progress toward policy, systems, and environmental changes, community engagement, learning about tobacco, and the factors that supported or challenged success in 2024.



**“Through our events and community outings, folks are more open to ... different alternatives to smoking. With quit plans, patches, lozenges, and gum, people have been open to that behavior change. Communities are starting to look at decreasing their smoking habit.”**

– Association for Nonsmokers Minnesota team member

**“I just know that [before the drum circles the men] ... they weren’t generally in their kids’ lives. Because I remember them speaking about that at camp, about being there for their kids and things like that. But now they’re celebrating that their families are together.”**

– Native American Community Clinic team member

## Progress on policy changes

**HOPE-funded projects helped pass seven new policies/resolutions related to commercial tobacco control and sacred tobacco revitalization.**

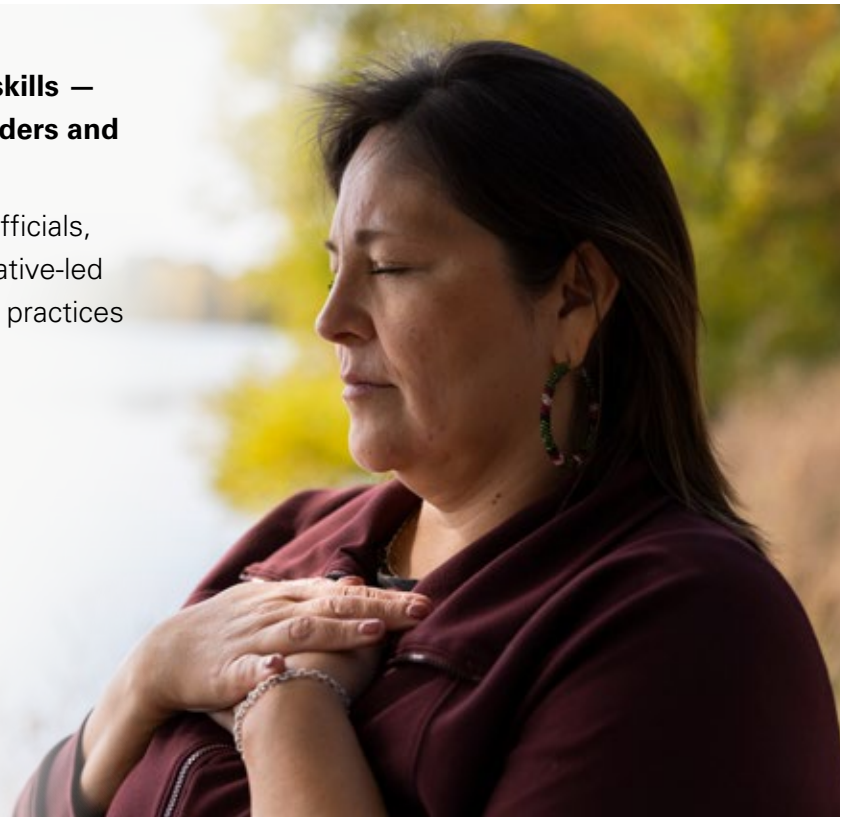
- Fifty-nine percent of surveyed participants reported noticing these changes, which included flavored commercial tobacco bans, pricing regulations, sacred tobacco protections, and smoke-free space enforcement.
- Projects partnered with other funded projects in the initiative, and community leaders — sharing language, research, and advocacy strategies — to advance policy change across cities and Tribal Nations.
- Several projects supported state-level coalitions like Minnesotans for a Smoke-Free Generation, and joined efforts like “Don’t Discount My Life,” which set a \$15 minimum cigarette price in Minneapolis and banned tobacco discounts.
- In Vadnais Heights, the mayor and city council unanimously passed an ordinance restricting menthol and flavored commercial tobacco sales from the city, prioritizing community health over profit and positioning the city as a leader in commercial tobacco-free initiatives.

**“When we started gathering stories from our own people, the data spoke for itself. We didn’t have to convince policymakers — our community members’ experiences did that.”**

– FamilyWise team member

**HOPE also strengthened policy advocacy skills — actively involving 63 underrepresented leaders and 48 decision makers.**

Projects trained youth, engaged with public officials, and promoted culturally grounded policies. Native-led projects led efforts to restore sacred tobacco practices and differentiate them from commercial use.



**“We’re changing the system so it works for us, and youth are learning how to advocate. They’ve researched commercial tobacco, created PSAs, and presented their stories to legislators, schools, and the community. Before, they worked behind the scenes — now they use their voices and take action.”**

– Indigenous Peoples Task Force team member



**“We’ve been reclaiming traditional tobacco as the foundation of our work. When we go into the community and start with ceremony, the whole room shifts, we [are] strangers at first, but by the end, we are a whole community again.”**

– Indigenous Peoples Task Force team member

Many partners also supported policy education, enforcement, and monitoring, helping shift norms and make commercial tobacco use less socially acceptable.



## Progress on systems changes

HOPE-funded projects created system-level changes across Minnesota. Seventy-five percent of survey respondents noticed improvements such as anti-tobacco messaging, healthier lifestyles, and shifts in organizational practices.

Projects helped rebuild systems by centering culture. Native Nations led efforts to restore teachings like using Asemaa and Ānśáśa<sup>1</sup> ceremonies before gatherings. Cultural activities like drumming and beadwork engaged youth and supported healing and prevention.

<sup>1</sup>Terms used for sacred tobacco among Ojibwe and Dakota Native Nations. Respectively.

**“I want more people to carry Asemaa and use it in the right way because Asemaa is healing.** It is just being more out there in the community because we do have a good response and people are interested in learning more about the culture and participating in these kinds of events, we just need to offer more I think as far as community pride.”

– Bois Forte Band of Chippewa Tribal Council team member

**In 2023, Indigenous Peoples Task Force (IPTF) collaborated with the Governor’s Office to declare Traditional Tobacco Awareness Day.** HOPE funding ensures the day is celebrated and acknowledged statewide, and government agencies have updated policies to differentiate sacred and commercial tobacco, HOPE funding enhanced the organization’s capacity to advocate for the recognition of this day in 2024.

**“We lost an entire generation almost to drugs and alcohol.**

And even though these kids were being raised by their grandparents, aunties, uncles, sometimes these people were overwhelmed with children and just trying to make it. Now, we see young people learning traditional skills again. They’re excited about it. They want to learn more.”

– Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe team member



Thirty-eight leaders advanced systems change and promoted healthy behaviors. One project also supported state advocacy, leading to expanded access to tobacco cessation treatment through better provider training and recognition of tobacco addiction as a legitimate health condition.

**“The number of mental health and substance-use providers that do different levels of treatment and have a grounds policy ... that number is going up in Minnesota.”**

– American Lung Association team member

## Progress on environmental changes

HOPE-funded projects led to visible environmental improvements in communities related to commercial and traditional tobacco. Seventy-seven percent of surveyed participants noticed cleaner spaces, healthier workplaces, more non-smoking signage, and greater access to sacred tobacco. Projects helped reduce commercial tobacco litter, improved compliance with smoke-free areas, and encouraged wellness at work through healthier food options.

They also expanded access to sacred tobacco by planting gardens, sharing medicines, and creating spaces for ceremonial use—helping communities reconnect with cultural teachings.

Lastly, at least 36 community leaders supported these efforts, and over half of survey respondents noticed local leaders promoting environmental changes showing strong community support for healthier, more respectful environments.

**“The program sent out maps to establish the [designated smoking] areas, it did help a lot. Before, employees would go to the front door to light up, smoking less because it is further to walk.”**

– Lower Sioux Indian Community team member

**“Planting tobacco on-site increased access to traditional tobacco. Not just having it outside but drying it and being able to distribute it for ceremonies and community use.”**

– Lower Sioux Indian Community team member



## Community engagement

HOPE-funded projects prioritized cultural relevance, accessibility, and inclusion. All partners adapted materials to reflect community values, using inclusive language and translating into languages like Oromo, Somali, Swahili, Amharic, and Ojibwe. They simplified content for different age groups and offered tools like postcards and petitions to support advocacy.

Projects used trusted community spaces—like churches and clinics—and worked with local leaders to build trust with communities. Outreach included social media, podcasts, and in-person events, with culturally appropriate incentives to boost participation. Cultural connection was central to engagement. Projects offered beadwork, drumming, and regalia-making to support prevention, healing, and mental health. Partners adjusted their outreach and education approaches based on feedback, using surveys and conversations to refine messages and improve accessibility, particularly for young people.

**“We knew that standard anti-smoking messages weren’t working for our community, so we made our own. We used our stories, our languages, and our experiences to create something real.”**

– Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe team member

Finally, HOPE projects formed 41 new partnerships with schools, clinics, and local groups—building a strong foundation for long-term community change.



“One of the main factors that led to this achievement in such a short time is that the message reached people in the language they understand well, delivered by community members. If an outside expert were to speak to them, it wouldn’t resonate as deeply. **When people from the community, whom they know and trust, explain things in their language, they truly listen. This approach is very powerful.**”

– Sub-Saharan African Youth and Family Services of Minnesota team member

**“There was definitely a disconnect with the youth—they weren’t understanding what we were saying, so we had to simplify it to make it more accessible.”**

– North Point Health and Wellness team member

## Practice based learnings

In 2024, HOPE-funded projects faced challenges like staff and partner turnover, difficulties engaging participants, limited awareness about commercial tobacco, cultural barriers, and tight timelines. These issues disrupted momentum, delayed policy work, and made outreach harder.

In response, projects adjusted schedules, shifted outreach strategies, built trust with community leaders, and reframed messages to focus on wellness and sacred tobacco rather than commercial tobacco. Native-led projects also found ways to adapt cultural practices despite limited access to traditional tobacco and loss of generational knowledge.

## Future vision for hope

HOPE-funded projects will continue to advance policy change, promote access to sacred tobacco, and reduce commercial tobacco use.

They plan to support cities with policy implementation, expand cultural restoration efforts, and strengthen partnerships across sectors. Projects will deepen trust in communities, especially through youth leadership and family engagement. They also aim to build healthier workplaces and communities that nurture a lasting culture of wellness and collaboration.





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**Golden Aspen Consulting**  
Clarity, connection and learning for positive change



**Lighthouse  
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