

Involving tribes, improving road safety

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State departments of transportation that are moving toward zero deaths are committed to reducing fatalities and injuries on all roads inside their state boundaries—including those that run through tribal lands. That's important, because crashes are the leading cause of unintentional death for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people ages 1 to 44, and states cannot achieve zero road deaths without comprehensive road safety programs.

Washington, Montana, South Dakota, and North Dakota are four states whose departments of transportation have made real connections with tribal governments, planners, law enforcement, and emergency services in developing road safety plans. State Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) updates are a prime opportunity for these states to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, identify road safety challenges, and find solutions. Tribes are also increasingly developing their own Transportation Safety Plans, which can give them access to additional federal resources.

A first step in producing an SHSP update that accounts for tribal road safety challenges is to establish cordial and parallel government-to-government collaboration. In Washington, the Centennial Accord is the foundation of a collaborative environment for transportation and traffic safety efforts between tribes

and the State of Washington. Signed in 1989, the Accord established government-to-government relations between the state and tribes, in an effort to resolve disagreements before they reached the courtroom. That framework of collaboration was applied to enhance tribal involvement in traffic safety planning.

The Centennial Accord gives state agencies a protocol for officially interacting with tribes, including having a tribal liaison. Washington transportation officials connect with tribal committees, boards, law enforcement groups, and planning organizations during SHSP updates to engage representatives from the 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington. Traffic safety boards and organizations provide a framework for communicating with tribal staff involved with the 4 E's of highway safety: education, enforcement, engineering, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

Once government-to-government collaboration is established, safety summits are an effective way for state and tribal planners to share information and strengthen personal relationships. In the lead-up to the Montana Comprehensive Highway Safety Plan (CHSP) update in 2014, state and tribal representatives collaborated on and conducted four safety summits. These summits were hosted by tribes in Montana, with

rotating sponsorship each year to encourage tribal ownership over road safety best practices.

Tribes also host summits and meetings in South Dakota. Meetings often include FHWA division staff, representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the South Dakota Departments of Transportation (SDDOT) and Public Safety, tribal historic preservation officers, tribal chairs and presidents, and sometimes council members.

This year, SDDOT will hold its 6th Tribal Transportation Safety Summit. The event will be hosted by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The summit is an opportunity for state and tribal representatives to build relationships, and to bring together representatives from the 4 E's.

Before South Dakota completed its most recent SHSP update in 2014, SDDOT presented its draft SHSP at the Tribal Safety Summit to get input on how to integrate tribal road safety needs into the SHSP. Tribes were eager to provide feedback, and asked if SDDOT would be at the table—to provide technical assistance, data, and answer questions—as tribes created their own transportation safety plans.

Ongoing communication and collaboration can help solve many, but not all, tribal road challenges. Data quality is a persistent challenge in

reaching tribal road safety goals. Only one out of the four tribes in North Dakota has equipment compatible with the state's electronic crash reporting system. The state is exploring options for improving the ability of tribes to access and use data in project planning and selection.

Data-sharing is also a challenge in Washington. State and tribal planners need crash data on tribal roads to make the case for federal and state grant money. But there are not always the staff and resources needed to process data. To help, the Washington Traffic Safety Commission funded an ongoing project that allows each tribe's crash codes to be uploaded automatically to the state's electronic ticketing and crash reporting system.

The benefits of involving tribes in road safety planning are numerous. In Washington, tribes gain increased awareness of the SHSP process and they take ownership of the final SHSP plan. With ownership, tribes are more likely to use the SHSP as a guide and source of information for their own transportation safety plans. Tribal planners, enforcement, and EMS become familiar with target zero strategies, which can be valuable when applying for state grant funding. Washington's data on behavioral factors in fatal and serious injury crashes is now more complete and accurate.

In Montana, tribal involvement brings the entire state population closer to a cohesive vision zero goal: zero fatalities, zero serious injuries. Tribal issues and strategies are integrated into CHSP emphasis areas, and there has been a downward trend in AI/AN fatalities. Participation from tribal safety representatives helps build

trust between state agencies and tribal governments.

In South Dakota, tribal involvement ensures that tribal concerns and strategies are addressed in the SHSP. Close coordination with tribes has led to broad support of the annual traffic safety summit. The safety summit is a vehicle for SDDOT staff and tribal representatives to interact, and for tribes to share low-cost safety improvements. SDDOT staff also make a point to be available to help resolve any road safety or general transportation issues.

In North Dakota, ongoing coordination and collaboration is a success that begets success. Tribal involvement ensures that NDDOT is aware of concerns on reservations,

especially regarding state-owned roads that go through tribal land. Years of outreach leads to SHSP updates that include strategies to reduce crashes on tribal lands and across the state, and there are now full-time Traffic Safety Outreach Program Coordinators (funded through federal grants) who serve as contacts on two of the state's reservations.

For more on these success stories of tribal-state collaboration, and other case studies highlighting the best safety practices from around the country, please see FHWA's Noteworthy Practices Database: go.usa.gov/czYNd.

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