

Gangs responsible for as much as 80 percent of crime

**GANGS continued
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to discuss the health, wellness and safety of our youth, to provide prevention and intervention strategies from a strength-based approach," said Tribal member Lisa Leno, Prevention coordinator for the Tribe and coordinator of the Gang Summit.

"This summit is about the relationship and impact that gangs have on Native American youth. This summit will address behaviors, not individuals."

The two-day conference drew 200 from Tribes, county and state agencies. Attendees came to learn more about gang issues in Native communities, hear ideas for addressing the problem and to make connections, find resources and compare notes.

"My goal was to network," said Wayne Miller (Warm Springs), a Meth Prevention coordinator at his Tribe, "and to get more people involved in prevention, so they can tell their kids."

Prevention can start in the family, but so can gang activity.

"We're finding the third generation of gang members in trouble," said Becky Halbirt, a parole officer with Oregon Youth Authority.

While gang members are believed to include only 1 to 3 percent of a community's population, they may be responsible for as much as 80 percent of the crime in an area, according to the 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment.

"Gangs are not new," said Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg, who also is a member of the Governor's Meth Task Force and the Tribal Meth Task Force.

Soderberg described his experience as a youth in boarding school.

"I found the toughest kid, a Modoc Indian, to teach me to fight," Soderberg said. "He couldn't teach, but he could fight and that's how I learned."

"Because of the gang mentality, I didn't do anything different until I was 45 years old."

"You have to look past the faces," said Jacob Flores, a psychologist



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg talks during the opening remarks of the Oregon Indian Country Gang Summit at Spirit Mountain Casino on Thursday, April 16. The summit continued on Friday, April 17.

and gang prevention specialist from Tucson, Ariz. "These were babies. They were not born into their behavior. The seed is perfect. They are good. The soil is barren."

As a school administrator in Tucson, Flores said he first wanted to put gang members in jail, but "then I visited their homes. I saw mattresses in bare bedrooms with sheets that hadn't been washed in months. I saw them taking care of their younger brothers and sisters. You have to open your eyes to what's going on in your community."

"We have to have forgiveness for them. You have to do it with an open hand, not a closed fist."

"It's about touching people who haven't been touched," said Arthur Jenkins, a former gang member now on parole.

"None of us get out of here unscathed," Flores said. "We all have our pain."

Jillene Joseph, executive director of the Gresham-based Native Wellness Institute, took that one step further.

"We can't change anyone else," Joseph said. "The one person we can change is ourselves."

Historical trauma still plays a role, she said. "Some say, 'Move on,' and yes, that's true, but you first

have to talk about it. There were 150 million Native Americans here when Europeans arrived. Today, there are about 4 million."

The oppression that Europeans brought said to surviving Native Americans, "It is not OK to be who you are."

"Historical trauma leads to current day trauma, and that's the norm for many Tribal families today," Joseph said.

"Part of it is to be aware, but we also have to look for opportunities for healing and growth, to become whole. We have to do the work."

"We all have experienced trauma. The key is what you do about it."

"Some get stuck in the doom and gloom mode," Joseph added, "but you have to recognize resiliency. And we have to provide opportunities that allow resiliency."

"Healthy communities all start with us. When we choose to live a healthy lifestyle, we will impact other people."

"Start with one," said Flores, "the one that tugs at your heart. If you get one, you will get more."

"Prosecution alone won't solve the problem," said Portland-based Assistant U.S. Attorney Scott Kerin. "It's a multi-faceted problem. It needs a multi-faceted solution."

To that end, the federal government has created a specialized gang unit and localized gang task forces — "continued outreach to law enforcement and the community."

"It's a work in progress," Kerin said.

In a panel discussion, Tribal representatives from Oregon, the Yakama Nation in Washington state and the Turtle Mountain Tribe in North Dakota described Tribal gang experiences, and barriers to keeping the worst of these behaviors under control.

"Our hope is that state, federal and local communities will hear what the Tribes are saying," said Dave Fullerton, Grand Ronde's Social Services manager.

"I don't know what our gang activity is," said Tom Younker, vice chairman of the Coquille Indian Tribe, "but we're keeping our kids very occupied." He noted events like canoe journeys.

"The more you show love to your kids," Younker said, "that's the only way of dealing with kids who want to be loved and be involved."

He said he also believes that the gang issue is a way for "Tribes to work together as a total community."

The Klamath Tribe has "many community-awareness and education programs to create positive opportunities for families," said Tribal Council Chair Joe Kirk. Barriers to success include a high unemployment rate and denial about the problem.

"We have to have total commitment or it's not going to be fixed," Kirk said.

"Culture is prevention," said DeAnna Pearl, Alcohol and Drug Prevention counselor for the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians.

"Education also is prevention," said Rhonda Malone, Social Services director of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians.

"Grand Ronde has been very progressive on this issue," said moderator John Spence, an educator and consultant. "You're on the right path. That's the reason it hasn't escalated here."

Members of the Grand Ronde Chinook Canoe Family performed.

The event was funded with \$44,000 from a grant from the Oregon Youth Authority in collaboration with Marion County Juvenile Department. Northwest Gang Investigators Association also sponsored the event.

The Planning Committee for the summit included Tribal member Lisa Leno, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; Dave Fullerton, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; Tribal member Shannon Simi, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; Faye Fagel, Marion County Juvenile Department; Christina Puentes, Oregon Youth Authority; Rhonda Holder, Polk County Juvenile Department; Deborah Kroeker, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; Tribal member Carmen Mercier, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; Violet Folden, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Elder; and Gladys Hobbs, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Elder. ■



Tribal Elder Betty Bly was among the group of people who attended the Oregon Indian Country Gang Summit.