

Community involvement improves children's lives

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Spring carnivals are fun for everyone. They bring people out from the hibernation imposed on them by cold and dark winter days. Everyone gets a chance to visit and enjoy activities such as dog races, socializing, unaware that their young people were partying and drinking.

Alcohol had been brought into the community, and the kids were all gathered at a home where the adult was away from the community. By the time community members became aware of what their youth were up to, the young were quite drunk.

Events such as this are not unique to Native communities nor are they unusual. They happen in predominantly white urban communities as well. What is unusual and worth sharing and writing about is how community leaders came together immediately to talk about how the community could respond to the incident. A decision was made from the outset not to engage in blaming, but rather take

the incident as an opportunity to bring the community together. It was decided that a community meeting should be held later in the week. A letter was composed by Nora David inviting every household to the meeting, and the letter was hand-delivered.

The meeting was held and there were about 100 people there from a community of about 80 to 100 which means that everyone in the community and surrounding communities attended the meeting. Infants and elders were all there; mothers and fathers attended; young and old came to the community hall.

The meeting was opened with a prayer by Nora David, First Chief in Mentasta. She then turned the floor over to Elder Katie John, who set the tone for what took place the rest of the evening. She spoke about her own experiences with alcohol and of the importance of not casting blame, but of coming together as a community and showing the young people that they were loved. Many people spoke and echoed the same theme in their own words. The young people got up to apologize to the community for the

poor choice they had made by drinking. The adults got up and apologized to the young people for failing to pay enough attention to them and promised to do better in the future.

The community decided to make the community hall available to the youth since their recreational center froze up and has been unusable. The youth activities were re-established. The community committed to buy video games and a juke box for the youth to put in school open late and on weekends so that the youth could use it. Many suggestions were made

of how communications between the youth and the adults could be improved. Many of the adults who spoke told the youth how important they were and how they intended to make a greater effort to be available to listen, to visit, and to share in activities.

The meeting broke up after about two hours with a commitment to meet again in a month. The youth stayed in the hall to enjoy some activities while the adults went home knowing that they had taken the time to make Mentasta a more nurturing place for everyone living in it.