

Best strategy is drug abuse prevention

by Joseph G. Wilson
Goldbelt Inc. Chief Executive Officer

This welcome address was presented by Joseph G. Wilson to the regional substance abuse conference, "Freedom to Live When Death is the Hunter" in Juneau earlier this month.

JUNEAU — It is a pleasure for me, both personally and on behalf of the Goldbelt corporation to welcome you to this important conference on healthier communities, sponsored by the Tlingit and Haida Central Council.

No goals are more important to our tribes or our nation than building healthy lives in alcohol and drug free communities.

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OPINION

Recent polls have shown that substance abuse prevention is a top priority in every state. This is the result of the awareness that has developed, alerting us to the risk and threat of an entire new generation plagued by substance abuse.

We now know that the threat is everywhere — in cities and in rural America, among Native and non-Native people, in Alaska as well as the other states.

As serious as the problem of alcohol and drug abuse is nationally, it is even more serious in Alaska. A recent study has shown that 11.3 percent of Alaskan youth have used cocaine, 24.9 percent have used marijuana, and 25.8 percent have used alcohol by the time they have entered high school.

What makes these statistics so alarming are the results of a recent study tracking the addiction record of young people by the Hazelden Corp. in Minnesota.

According to the Hazelden research, 60 percent of the young people in their sample population who have used drugs by age 15 developed dependencies, and 33 percent of those whose first use of drugs occurred in high school developed addiction.

However, if the first incidence of alcohol and drug use occurred at the age of 20, the probability of addiction was no higher than the national norm of 10 percent.

What this means to us is that we must focus our attention on early prevention or run the risk of extremely heavy addiction in the next generation.

The war on drugs being waged nationwide has taught us that substance abuse prevention can win. There are only three ways to fight drugs, through interdiction, treatment or prevention. All are important, but prevention contains the long-range solution.

Interdiction is important as a statement of national morality, even though we intercept only 4 or 5 percent of the illegal drugs coming into our country, and we do not reach the most dangerous drug in terms of numbers of addicted persons, which is alcohol.

Treatment, which is important, has expanded dramatically in the past 10 or 15 years and deserves our support, but you cannot win a war by only taking care of the wounded.

That leaves prevention — especially focused on young people — as the strategy that offers the greatest hope for the future we all want.

Prevention works best through united community-wide effort. Community mobilization has emerged as the most successful strategy we have and the only long-range solution to alcohol and drug abuse.

No one segment of our communities can be effective alone. Schools would already be drug free if teachers could solve the problem. Young people do not spend all of their time in school. Common sense and the experience of pilot communities have taught us

several lessons.

First, communities can suffer from denial as much as individuals. We must face the problem.

Second, we must coordinate and mobilize all the communities' resources — young people, school administration and teachers, parents, tribal leaders, churches, law enforcement officers and judges, business leaders and concerned citizens.

Together we can create a climate that will encourage healthy life choices and take the glamor out of drugs and alcohol. That is the focus of this conference.

I like a number of things about this conference:

- It addresses a major national problem.

- It seeks to work through a winning strategy — community mobilization.

- It stresses Native American values. Much of our success will depend upon our spiritual strength.

- The right people are here. Your own commitment brought you to this meeting and your leadership back

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home will be the foundation for your community success.

- If we ever worked together for the good of all, now is the time to do it. As you work and plan this week, be assured that the Tlingit and Haida people, the Central Council and Goldbelt stand by you and will offer every assistance we can to insure your success.