

Scotts Bluff County Tobacco-Free Collaborative

"Sometimes You Just Need to Talk to Someone?"

"Sometimes you just need to talk to someone to make sure you're on the right page," says Stephen Huerta, project coordinator of the Scotts Bluff County Tobacco-Free Collaborative in Scotts Bluff, Neb. In Huerta's case, however, that "someone" turned out to be two people from TTAC: Debra Morris and Madeleine Solomon.

Huerta came to his current position with some family history: his grandfather had died from throat cancer several years earlier, so the issue of tobacco control was already a personal one.

The passion he brought to the Scotts Bluff County Collaborative, however, did not seem to be matched by his colleagues—at least not by the measure of their attendance at monthly meetings. "Out of 20 people, maybe three or four would show up," says Huerta.

As the coalition's third coordinator in a span of just 18 months, Huerta recognized that its members had reasons to drift away, but he was committed to finding ways to keep it together and make it stronger.

At the National Conference on Tobacco OR Health in San Francisco in November 2002, he picked up information from TTAC's booth and later called TTAC to follow up. Debra Morris interviewed Huerta to get a better handle on his needs, and once she identified his challenges (most notably coalition building), Morris brought in TTAC consultant Madeleine Solomon to help.

Over the course of several conversations with Solomon, Huerta discussed making substantial changes in the way his collaborative conducted its business. Rather than having the entire group convene for monthly meetings, for example, he suggested dividing its members into project-oriented task forces that would appeal to the members' specific interests and draw on their strengths.

"When you're new you start to wonder," says Huerta, recalling his conversations with Solomon, "but from discussing what my ideas were, I felt like I was on the same page as she was."

In March 2003, Huerta convened his first task force meeting on law enforcement issues (such as how to convince law enforcement to conduct "compliance checks"—checking retailers to see if they are asking to see IDs for the age of tobacco purchasers). "Everyone showed up," Huerta reports, "which tells me this is a good way of going about it."

The collaborative had a long way to go, but Huerta was more confident about its direction and was optimistic about its long-term impact on tobacco use in Scotts Bluff County. "When it is your job to educate your community about the deadly health issues that come from a socially accepted practice like using tobacco," he concludes, "it's very comforting to have an agency like TTAC for guidance and support."

In July 2006, Huerta reported a 96 percent retailer compliance rate in the county, combined with an ongoing effort by collaborative volunteers to educate retailers' employees in the best ways to check tobacco purchasers' age. This work has resulted, in "a good working relationship with retailers that didn't exist before," according to Huerta. In September 2006 the collaborative will present arguments before the county health board asking it to make all public buildings, bars and restaurants in the county's two largest cities (Scotts Bluff and Gering) smoke-free.

The collaborative is also working with both Latino and Native American communities in the county:

- The Latino Community. In 2005 the collaborative sponsored a Latino women's conference on smoking awareness and cessation, and was sponsor for a state-funded youth activism program called "No Limits." In a county with a population of 35,000, 79 youths and 20 adults attended a May 2006 "No Limits" dance and peer-to-peer tobacco education event.
- *The Native American Community*. In June 2006 the collaborative sponsored a three-day workshop on tobacco cessation for Native American adults and youth. The event was called "The Lakota Way of Life" and it drew 200 attendees. The collaborative also acted as partial sponsor of a one-and-a-half day powwow. Among other things it addressed the proper use of tobacco in Lakota ceremony, and promoted a "smoke-free home and car pledge." The powwow drew 300 attendees.

In 2006 the collaborative worked with both Lakota and Latino communities in a "Family Walk" program—as a way of asking county residents to make dining areas tobacco-free and asking residents to go smoke-free for a day.