TESTIMONY

Senate members my name is Caitlin Baker, I am 16 years old and live in Norman Oklahoma. I am a member of the Muscogee Creek nation. For the last 4 years I have run an outreach program that works with Native American communities spreading the message that diabetes can be prevented through physical activity and healthy lifestyle choices. I have traveled to communities across the nation. My message is prevention. I feel that my generation has been raised with the continual message that diabetes is rampant in Native communities. My peers many times feel that diabetes is inevitable. They tell me that they know they will get it eventually because their parents, grandparents and other family members have diabetes. This feeling of inevitability can cause them to not take prevention seriously. This in turn affects the success of programs put in place to prevent diabetes. I feel that one major change that needs to be made in the programs is a shift from inevitability to PREVENTABILITY. Stress to youth that diabetes is preventable. Inform them how to avoid diabetes and then follow through by giving them the tools needed like access to physical activity and healthier food options. Tell youth and communities what needs to be done to prevent diabetes and then work with them to provide what is needed.

I stress to youth how important it is to use their voice and speak to the leaders of their communities. Not just health professionals who are working in diabetes prevention but also tribal leaders. Go to them with what they feel they need to make good lifestyle choices. Their voice is a powerful weapon. I also ask their leaders to listen. Youth want to be heard and respected. I have been in communities where youth have asked for simple things like a say in their lunch menus, a soccer field, a pool, to have drinking and smoking banned in their public parks. These are what youth want. Involve your kids; let them have ownership of healthy changes being made in their community. I once visited a jogging trail that was the vision of the local school kids in the small town of Davenport, Oklahoma. The students decided they wanted one so they raised money, got grants and built it. When I visited it a year later there was no trash, no graffiti. The local kids were proud of it and respected it. No offense to any grownups but I felt like if the adults had been handling it, they might still be discussing how to get it built and arguing what to name it. My point is not that adults aren’t needed or can’t get things done; just that including the youth is a positive thing. Encourage them to be involved in planning and carrying out those plans. This will give them pride in themselves and their communities.

 I also stress partnerships. I would not be able to do the work I do without my partners. I hope that more organizations, both tribal and non-tribal will work together. Diabetes prevention goes hand in hand with heart disease and tobacco control. The organizations working in these areas should be open to working together. Breathing problems and heart disease cause poor circulation, which in turn causes complications in diabetes patients. It seems that all these areas should be working together to get the message across of prevention and be aware of the work each other are doing. Share ideas and funding so that no one is duplicating programs.

 Also, know your community. I have spoken with kids in New York, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Arizona. Everywhere I go there is a different issue with their youth. The diabetes programs I work with ask me to address prevention and physical activity but also to tailor my message to what their community is struggling with. Each community is different, take time to ask and learn what issues there are. Don’t approach this with a one answer for everyone attitude.

 I don’t mean through my testimony to give the impression that programs aren’t working. I can only speak about programs I have been involved in and all have been positive experiences. My thoughts and ideas come from seeing the way those programs are working.

 In closing, many times people compliment me on the work I do. I always appreciate words of encouragement, but I also tell them that every community has kids like me. Find and encourage them. The topic today is “the way out of the diabetes crisis in Indian country.” In my opinion the best way out is to include all members of our communities. Ask and listen to your youth. We are living the crisis of diabetes. We don’t want to live with diabetes. Let us work with you to find a way out of the crisis.

Thank you for inviting me today to join in your discussion.