

Case Discussion About Safe Ceremony Practice in Blackfoot Territory

In the early spring there was a ceremony held by one of our Blackfoot Traditional Leaders. This ceremony is part of our natural law and governance in Blackfoot culture. The usual physical setting is 150 + people gather in two large tipi's for up to 12 hours. The gift of ceremony, food, prayers, healthcare is done communally. People often come from all over North America and Europe to attend this ceremony. However recognizing that under our current circumstances there needed to be changes to protect our elder's and children. The group organizing the ceremony met and the following changes were made:

1. The ceremonialists who gathered in the tipi, met the current public health numbers of 15 maximum. All people maintained a distance of 6 feet apart where possible and masks were available when distancing was not possible.
2. All people who attended were screened at the entrance road to the ceremony. They consented to giving their names for contact tracing if needed and voluntarily answered Covid Screening questions. In addition they were given masks, hand sanitizer and teaching on safe social distancing practices.
3. All food was prepared under AHS food handling protocol with proper hand washing, masks and gloves. All food was put in take away containers and in a personal bag so each person would receive their own food. No communal food was shared in the ceremony.
4. People who were participating waited in their vehicles until it was their time to join. Everyone who came within 2 metres of each other wore masks and hand sanitizer was available for use. There was no communal visiting.
5. All people were reminded to self isolate after the gathering and get tested if any symptoms appeared.
6. Public washroom facilities with hand washing stations were set up. Facilities were cleaned regularly throughout the day.

The other key factor that was crucial in success of the ceremony was information was communicated to people about the changes before the set date and the need to maintain public safety. People were informed about the crowd limitations, the format and goal to protect our knowledge keepers.

These practices allowed the ceremony to occur yet keeping in mind safety of the community and participants. The ceremony was completed under proper protocol, the modifications were only around social behaviours and no effect on prayer.