Northern Exposure

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Nobody believed that Clarence Smelcer (see photo) could corral a group of Alaska's native HIVers into one room to discuss the disease. "People thought it would be one big bitchfest," says the 41-year-old Athabascan activist, who tested positive in 1991. Undaunted, Smelcer formed an advisory board of a range of indigenous communities—Aleut, Inupiat, Tlinget, Haida, Simshian, Athabascan and Inuit. Since January the group has met monthly, strategizing to improve HIV services at Anchorage's Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC). It's about time, Smelcer says: "Everybody talks about a healthy community. Well, a healthy community starts with dialogue."

There's much to discuss. Alcoholism, drug use, unsafe sex, STDs and homelessness abound in native communities, and HIV carries a powerful stigma. Many native people mistrust doctors and the government, and some 200 Alaskan villages are accessible only by boat or plane. Smelcer says the board is in perfect health—for instance, it persuaded the ANMC to hire a mental health practitioner.

For activists who want to motivate underserved communities, Smelcer suggests:

Earn trust. "I'm a 10-year recovering alcoholic. I've been on the street. People know where I'm coming from."

Listen. Don't discount anyone. One ANMC board member is a homeless man whose spot-on suggestions have already sparked big changes in ANMC services.

Be realistic. "Alaska natives, for example, are used to the government swooping in on a big plane, saying: 'We're here to help you.' But they just make things worse. I didn't say we'd change the world, because we can't."

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