

Can Health Councils Plan for a Culture of Health in New Mexico?



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As COVID-19 has swept across the country, one of the hardest hit areas has been the lands of the Navajo Nation and nearby Native American communities in [Northwestern New Mexico](#). The pandemic is emerging as a severe test of New Mexico's county and tribal health council system, which was established to address community health needs and concerns and help withstand these kinds of crises. "New Mexico Culture of Health," a part of the national "[Community Voices for Health](#)" project (see box), is tackling how to help health councils engage their communities in more participatory and effective ways.

Coronavirus infections have affected Native American communities at disproportionate rates, compounding a precarious health landscape for Native Americans who already experience excessively high rates of disease such as diabetes, coronary heart disease, and respiratory infections. The Indian Health Service, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services responsible for providing federal health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives, needs 9.1 billion to respond to the needs of first Americans, and currently, the agency's budget cannot support the overwhelming demand. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted persistent inequities in the access, quality, and availability of healthcare throughout the Indian Health system.

The county and tribal health council system, established in 1991 by the New Mexico legislature, was created to provide community health assessments and planning, and implement strategies to address local health priorities. As New Mexico does not have county-based public health offices and health boards, the 39 health councils play an essential role in the state's public health system. The health councils help to organize communities to identify and focus on local health issues including but not limited to disease prevention, substance use and mental health issues, and access to primary care. Informed by published health data and local information, health councils produce detailed assessments of local health needs and resources, which is used at the state and local level, and by non-profits, to secure funding in addition to what is allocated by the Department of Health. In 2019 the New Mexico Legislature passed a bill that earmarked \$1 million for the NM Department of Health to provide funding for the health councils; this partially restored the \$2.8 million in annual State funding that was suspended as part of 2010 budget cuts following the 2008 recession.

Led by the New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils (NMAHC) and Presbyterian Healthcare Services, and working with a network of partners including leaders of six selected Health Councils in high-need areas, the "New Mexico Culture of Health" (NMCOH) initiative is working to empower communities through community-based participatory research, community engagement training with a focus on underserved populations, and policy-to-action strategies around health equity issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic created further obstacles for the NMCOH team. Weeks after the crisis hit, New Mexico experienced a critical need for food as distribution schedules were disrupted, impacting supplies at grocery stores and food pantries.

One strength the NMAHC was able to leverage was its established virtual identity. The project team reconfigured pieces of the initiative to transition from face-to-face interaction to digital collaboration in an effort to maintain momentum. Currently, the NMCOH team is in the process of selecting the six county and tribal health councils and rounding out the network partnership for the implementation phase of the project. Part of this work will also include documenting what is learned during the 30-month initiative and sharing the information with all 39 county and tribal health councils.

The promise of New Mexico's health council system is that it can facilitate the kind of deep engagement and long-term planning that will help communities, in Northwestern New Mexico and all across the state, withstand threats like Covid-19. By reacting to and learning from the current crisis, the NMCOH team hopes to fulfill that promise.