

As tribes brace for the coronavirus, Partnership With Native Americans and its reservation partners are doing what they can to help



Pictured: At its 40,000-sf warehouse in Phoenix, Arizona Partnership With Native Americans pulls supplies for COVID-19 emergency requests from the Navajo Nation and other tribes in the Southwest.(Photo: Partnership With Native Americans)

Press Pool

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Their watchword: Don't leave Native Americans behind during the pandemic

News Release

Partnership With Native Americans

The coronavirus is impacting tribes far and wide. The Navajo Nation saw its first case on March 17th in Kayenta (153 miles) and Chilchinbito (175 miles) from the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The Oglala Sioux Tribe saw its first case on April 7 on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, a school employee from the Porcupine community. Both tribes have travel restrictions and checkpoints in place to mitigate the spread of the virus on the reservations, but delivery trucks from Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA) are still being allowed entry as a vital supply line.

Already facing food deserts and year-round shortages of food and clean water, high rates of diabetes and respiratory illness, limited access to healthcare and overcrowded housing, tribes throughout the Southwest and Northern Plains are bracing for the spread of the virus. Partnership with Native Americans is making emergency deliveries of food, water, sanitizer, toilet paper and other basics, while also continuing the regular

deliveries it makes year-round to senior centers, food banks, health programs and other program partners across hundreds of tribal communities. Partnership With Native Americans and its tribal partners are following health best practices and doing what they can to ensure we don't leave Native Americans behind during the pandemic.

On the Navajo Reservation in Kayenta, Arizona, Heather Yazzie is the Office Specialist with the Navajo Public Health Nursing (PHN) program, and Ruth White is the only registered nurse among a staff of 13 that covers four Navajo chapters (Kayenta, Chilchinbito, Dennehotso and Oljato). This team has been through previous disasters, from Hantavirus to the Animas River water contamination in 2015, but their response with COVID-19 is much different. Two staff are delivering medications, food boxes and other supplies to the households in quarantine. All staff are mandated to wear personal protective equipment during work – which now often means 10-12 hours per day, seven days a week. The program is temporarily closed to walk-ins and visitors, and health education with quarantined households or follow ups after COVID-19 and flu are being done by phone.

Ruth verified the Navajo Nation's first coronavirus outbreak in Chilchinbito but said, *"Now we [Kayenta] have apparently surpassed them."* She learned of an outbreak at a facility in Gallup serving transients and noted such follow ups with the patient and their contacts are extremely difficult. White and the other staff are focused on patient care and education to a vulnerable community, but right now there is also a big focus on data. The Elders are worried about their children and grandchildren, with some of them sharing, *"We heard about this when we were young"* – meaning the 1918 flu pandemic and quarantines – and they talk about how the people survived back then.

Heather shared, *"This is different than other disasters ... it's affecting the whole family – all living under one roof, some with more than 10 people to a house. There is just a lot of sadness right now."* She also shared that the Navajo Public Health Nursing program was lucky to receive some oximeters and thermometers and get those into the homes.

On the Pine Ridge Reservation in Wanblee, South Dakota, Mary Grimme Epps and her husband Bob operate a nonprofit serving youth. Last year they hosted a Native Food Preparation Education conducted by Partnership With Native Americans. During the pandemic, Mary and Bob are preparing and delivering more than 300 meals to youth on the weekends to combat the community's challenges with food access. (Schools are closed due to COVID-19 but delivering meals to students on the weekdays.)

Mary shared, *"The food pantry here closed down ... [only one mobile pantry delivers in April and it's two hours west in Red Shirt Table]. It is getting harder to find the quantity we need on account of the distance and limits on purchased items. We [get three to four calls] a day for food but our supplies are limited. We want to make sure we have money and supplies for the children... and another organization [providing for the elderly] ... course we laugh as we are the elderly. We are just reaching out to whomever and hoping people can help."*

They are planning to plant a garden behind the college center again this year, probably more potatoes and onions... Bob recently purchased a rotary tiller and seed potatoes, along with supplies for the weekend food packs [using donations as well as personal funds]. The Epps are aware that Partnership With Native Americans provided 200 emergency preparedness boxes with nonperishable food, water and personal hygiene items to the Wanblee Community Action Team for home delivery by volunteers and have since submitted a request to become a Partnership With Native Americans partner for both COVID and year-round support.

To help Partnership With Native Americans restock its warehouses to continue critical deliveries to the tribes, visit www.nativepartnership.org/COVID.

About Partnership With Native Americans

Partnership With Native Americans is a nonprofit committed to championing hope for a brighter future for Native Americans living on remote, geographically isolated and impoverished reservations. Established in 1990, Partnership With Native Americans collaborates with reservation programs to serve immediate needs and support long-term solutions for strong, self-sufficient Native American communities, improving the lives of 250,000 Native Americans annually.

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