

Navajo Youth Lead the Way to Healthier Lives in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico

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At A Glance

About 200,000 Navajo Nation tribal residents live in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Native Americans are more likely to have diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity than other groups. Lack of access to healthy foods and knowledge of how to live a healthy lifestyle may contribute to their health problems. Partners In Health, the Community Outreach Patient Empowerment (COPE) Program, and coalition members provided 30 young people with the skills and resources to lead two reservation-wide conferences and several health-focused projects.



Public Health Challenge

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Native American adults are twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to have diabetes, 50% more likely to have obesity, and more likely to have cardiovascular diseases. Navajo Nation, the largest federally recognized tribal nation, faces some of these health problems. Navajo Nation stretches across more than 27,000 square miles through parts of three states: Arizona, Utah, and New

Mexico, but only have 10 grocery stores according to a 2014 Diné Policy Institute report. Approximately 200,000 Navajos live on the Navajo Nation. In the Navajo Area, 1 in 5 adults have diabetes and it is estimated that 75,000 have prediabetes. In addition, more than 75% of households on the reservation experience some level of food insecurity—unable to get enough food due to a lack of money or access to food, according to a 2014 study.

Find Out More

Inspire young people to become health champions for their communities by volunteering with youth-leadership organizations. Promote nutrition education programs in schools and after-school programs. Learn more about NCHO's COPE program. Visit <https://www.copeprogram.org/ncho>. This project is supported by CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) cooperative agreement.

Our people are succumbing to the temptations and dangers of unhealthy eating. I will help change this by educating my people about the effects of unhealthy eating and what they can do to prevent consumption-based illnesses.
- NCHO Youth Leader

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Approach

Although many Navajo youth feel they can have a positive effect on the health of their communities, they are not equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources to overcome high rates of diet-related illness. To help, COPE partnered with leadership in Navajo Nation to establish the Navajo Community Health Outreach (NCHO) Youth Leadership Program. The NCHO Program enrolled 30 Navajo young people across five Navajo Nation high schools. The young people participate in leadership workshops and learning activities to increase their knowledge of healthy foods while incorporating Navajo tradition and culture. The Navajo youth are then expected to lead a service project within their community.

Results

The service projects set up by the NCHO Youth Leaders reached their home communities and beyond. There are now seven new community and family gardens that provide healthy, fresh food to underserved families in the Window Rock community. Other service projects include healthy food demonstrations at local schools and encourage having healthier food snacks in school vending machines. As part of the efforts to educate communities, NCHO held their first youth-lead Navajo Nation Youth Summit in Crownpoint, New Mexico, in June 2016. The 2-day event attracted more than 90 participants across Navajo Nation and featured 15 presentations by the Youth Leaders on topics like gardening, food demonstrations, and leadership. In June 2017, an annual Navajo Nation Youth Conference had 134 attendees.

What's Next

The Partners In Health/COPE Program continue to support and work to sustain the NCHO Youth Leadership Program. Navajo elected leaders have endorsed youth programs as an important priority for building strong future leaders. Coalition partners and the youth leaders plan to expand by bringing the NCHO youth program to more schools and community organizations in the next 5 years. Youth leaders also plan to continue to hold the annual youth conference. Next year's conference will be held in June 2018. By strengthening formal partnerships with local tribal colleges and universities, faith-based organizations, and the Navajo Nation government, NCHO can be sustained for years to come.