



National Indian Health Board
**NATIONAL TRIBAL
 COVID-19 RESPONSE**

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Are Patients of Indian health programs getting vaccinated for COVID-19?

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Background

The first year of the COVID-19 Pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) to poor health outcomes due to social and economic factors. In addition to poverty, many AI/ANs live in rural areas, and geographic isolation limits access to quality health care. AI/ANs are more likely to live in multi-generational households, which, along with overcrowded housing, enable COVID-19 to spread among family members. Several early reports published in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* provided the evidence of the disproportionate impact on AI/ANsⁱ. In response many states have adopted vaccination plans that prioritize the distribution and administration of vaccines for their AI/AN population.

Facts on the Ground

Vaccine Distribution: IHS Patients

The Indian Health Service (IHS) asked Tribes and Urban Indian Health Programs whether they wanted to receive their vaccines from IHS or from their respective states. The Indian Health Service (IHS) reports that as of January 29, 2021 they had distributed [493,000 vaccines](#).ⁱⁱ IHS’s COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution List includes the 340 IHS, Tribal health programs, and Urban Indian Organizations that choose to receive COVID-19 vaccine from IHS; the balance get their vaccines from their respective states. Tribes in the Alaska Area chose to have the State serve as the distribution point for vaccines.

Vaccine Administration: IHS Patients

CDC reports that just over 50 percent of doses (CDC lists 493,000 distributed) have been administered.ⁱⁱⁱ This may not include state-distributed vaccines. There are now multiple reports directly from Tribes that the administration of vaccines is proceeding apace with the delivery of vaccines— “Shots in Arms” soon after receipt



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of the vaccines is the standard operating procedure, so that none go to waste. In the Northwest, typical first rounds of 200 to 800 doses received are reported and second doses have also been received in the same amounts for the Tribes contacted by NIHB. The amounts received have been sufficient to allow Tribes to extend offerings beyond early priority groups (health workers, other frontline professionals, and nursing home residents) to elders (those over 55 in some Tribes, or over 65). The Navajo Nation reports 78,520 doses received and 55,671 administered as of February 4, 2021^{iv}. Alaska Native Health Programs are receiving and administering vaccines at very high rates and priority groups have expanded to include young adults in some areas of the state.^v The Eastern Band of Cherokee Health Program also reports success in its vaccination effort, outperforming the state-wide average.

Vaccine Hesitancy

The feared hesitancy to receive the vaccine is not widespread for the early priority groups (health care workers and now elders). One Tribe that extended eligibility to young adults found more hesitancy in this group. Reports from Alaska and Washington note that once the community and personal benefit is explained to elders, most were willing to accept the need to be vaccinated.

Conclusion

The priority standing of Tribes and their citizens has resulted in early success in the distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines. Many Tribes have received their second doses to complete the two-dose regimen for the highest priority groups (including health workers) and are ready to expand the eligibility groups but are concerned about the continued flow of vaccines once more are eligible. Early evidence indicates that AI/ANs are receiving vaccines at a steady rate, as expected, although some concerns are like that reported for states nationwide. That concern is the uncertainty about future deliveries of vaccines. It remains to be seen if the acceptance of the vaccine by these early groups continues and how much the expected hesitancy exists for those not yet vaccinated.

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ⁱ Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, CDC, December 11, 2020.

ⁱⁱ [IHS COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution by IHS Area](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ [CDC COVID Data Tracker](#), February 8, 2021.

^{iv} Navajo Nation COVID-19 Website, February 8, 2021. <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19/COVID-19-Vaccine>

^v *Anchorage Daily News*, Jan 15, 2021. Alaska has received the highest per capita allocation of vaccines in the nation due to high percentage of population (19.5%) that are AI/ANs.