

Special Diabetes Program for Indians Helps Tribes Be #HealthyCommunities

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth, children, and families face many adverse experiences and health outcomes compared to the general U.S. population. One of the most prominent health disparities in Tribal communities is the high rate of type 2 diabetes. AI/ANs of all ages are disproportionately impacted by type 2 diabetes and its many chronic complications— whether through their own individual diagnosis or the diagnosis of a loved one. As such, Tribal communities must have the resources and support they need to access fresh and nutritious foods, safe places for physical activity, and quality diabetes treatment and intervention programs. Given this, it is more important than ever that Tribal communities work to prevent diabetes and its complications in young American Indians and Alaska Natives. One program in particular, the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI), has been especially successful in establishing and sustaining effective diabetes treatment and prevention programs in Indian Country.

Type 2 diabetes disproportionately affects minority race and ethnic groups – with the highest rates being among American Indian and Alaska Native youth. American Indian and Alaska Native youth age 10-19 are nine times more likely to have diagnosed type 2 diabetes compared to young non-Hispanic whites in the same age group. Furthermore, from 1990-2009 AI/AN youth age 15-19 experienced an increase in diagnosed diabetes of 110%. While these statistics are staggering, there are personal stories and real life implications behind each of the Native youth and families that have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. People with diabetes diagnosed before the age of 20 years have a life expectancy that is 15–27 years shorter than people without diabetes.

Diabetes treatment and prevention programs funded by SDPI have led to improvements in these statistics, as well as saving lives, in Tribal communities and has transformed the way diabetes is addressed. For example, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium's (ANTHC) "Store Outside Your Door" program highlights traditional foods of the Native peoples living within the region and teaches families how to harvest and prepare nutritious traditional foods that do not include many of the preservatives and sugars of the processed foods often available at local grocery stores. This model makes nutritious foods accessible to the community and infuses the local Indigenous culture back into mealtime.

Another example of the effective, innovative community health programming being conducted in Tribal communities around Indian Country is the "Cherokee Choices" program at the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). Like many Tribal communities, the EBCI has higher rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes than the U.S. general population. To combat these high rates, the Cherokee Choices program includes three main components: elementary school mentoring, worksite wellness for adults, and church-based health promotion. As a holistic approach to preventing diabetes and obesity in the local AI/AN population, Cherokee Choices also seeks to address racism, historic grief and trauma, mental health, and creates a supportive environment for developing positive policy changes.

These are just two examples of the over 300 Tribal programs nationwide taking an innovative, holistic and community- and evidenced-based approach to preventing diabetes in Native youth, children and families. [As one young American Indian from the Klamath Diabetes Program stated](#) after participating in the diabetes prevention program at the Cow

Creek Consortium in Oregon, "I truly believe [SDPI] can dramatically improve the health of the Klamath Tribes and bring us mo ben dic hosintambiek ("good health" in Klamath). I would have never had the courage or been in the shape necessary to accomplish my goals had it not been for the Diabetes Prevention Program. It is imperative that these types of programs are firmly in place to lead us to the next level of good health".