

National Indian Health Board



Public Health in Indian Country

Three sisters walked along a river bank and saw babies in the river helpless and struggling. The first sister, distraught, jumped in and tried to rescue them. The second sister, resolute to save them, jumped in the river and tried to teach them to swim. After looking at the scene, the third sister walked away. Confused, her sisters called out to her, "Where are you going?" She answered "I am going upstream to find out why the babies are floating in the river and to stop it."

This is the essence of public health, and the source of the public health mantra - 'working upstream.'

What is Public Health?

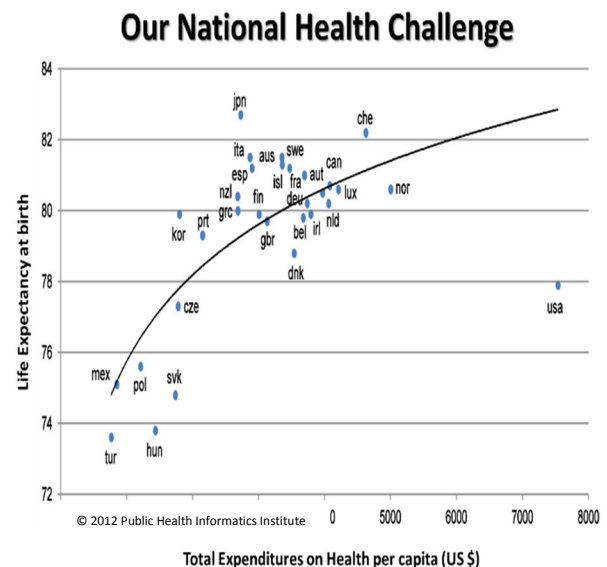
Public health is the science of protecting and improving the health of communities through education, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and research for disease and injury prevention. While health care systems like the Indian Health Service cater to the individual patient, public health seeks to serve whole communities.

Spending Public Health Dollars is a Cost Effective Approach

Expenditures on health care services do not always translate to improved health and quality of life. The U.S. spends more on healthcare than any other developed country, yet health care outcomes, including life expectancy, fall far behind.

In contrast, dollars spent on preventative care and population health greatly improve the health status of communities, and produce an exponential cost savings. We see this cost savings particularly in the area of chronic conditions. For example, through public health programs that teach healthy eating and lifestyles, many costly and devastating conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity, can be avoided.

A 2011 study published in Health Affairs found that increased spending by local public health departments can save lives currently lost to many of these and other preventable illnesses. For example, a 10% increase in spending translated to a 3.2% decrease in cardiovascular disease mortality. The additional cost to local health departments, on average, was \$312,274 a year. In comparison, achieving the same mortality reduction using treatment costs an estimated \$5.5 million.¹



Within the larger picture of public health, in 2008, Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released a report showing that an investment of \$10 per person annually in proven, community-based public health programs could save the United States more than \$16 billion within five years—a \$5.60 return for every \$1 invested.ⁱⁱ Yet another study, found that low-income communities experience the largest health benefit and savings from increases in public health spending.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why is Public Health Important to Indian Country?

A healthy Native community gets sick less frequently and spends less money on health care; this means better economic productivity and an improved quality of life for all of Indian Country. In addition to these overarching reasons to invest in public health, the health disparities experienced in Indian Country are often the areas of health that benefit the most from a public health approach. For example, chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and chronic lower respiratory disease are some of the leading causes of death for American Indian and Alaska Native people. These chronic conditions can be prevented with a well- designed and comprehensive public health approach. Other notable areas of disparity in Indian Country include unintentional injuries, substance abuse, and suicide. A public health approach can be extremely valuable in addressing these areas of disparity as well.

Public Health and the Trust Responsibility of the Federal Government

Through numerous treaties, Supreme Court cases, legislative acts, and executive orders, the federal government took on a duty to provide health care and other benefits to the Tribes across Indian Country. This duty is not the province of one particular federal agency; instead this duty runs from the whole federal government to the Tribes.

While there are agencies that have been set up to fulfill this duty, like Indian Health Service, to date, this duty has not been fulfilled. IHS is funded at approximately 56% of need. Because the federal government must meet its solemn obligations to the Tribes, it must look at ways it can address unmet health needs. Funding a public health approach is a viable and attractive way to improve the health and wellness of the Tribes and American Indian and Alaska Native people across Indian Country.

ⁱ See <http://content.heathaffairs.org/content/early/2011/07/19/hlthaff.2011.0196.full.pdf=html>

ⁱⁱ See <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/prevention08/Prevention08.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://works.bepress.com/glen_mays/119/