



# Priorities in Tribal Public and Environmental Health

## A NEED FOR ACTION

No matter where they live, all people deserve the opportunity for good health. Disruptions in American Indian/Alaska Native social and physical environments over many generations have led to disparities in public and environmental health outcomes. This has perpetuated inequities that threaten traditional ways of life and tribal health and wellness. Despite the large number (567) of federally recognized tribes in the US today, there remains little national recognition of the environmental injustices and lack of health equity that impact Indian Country. American Indian/Alaska Native people have long experienced poorer health compared to other Americans. Their lifespan is, on average, 4.4 years shorter than other Americans, and they suffer at higher rates than other Americans from diabetes, chronic liver disease, intentional self-harm and suicide and chronic lower-respiratory diseases.

## HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Advancing American Indian/Alaska Native health requires a holistic strategy that addresses the deeply rooted *historical, political, social and cultural contexts* that affect tribal health and well-being. These include:

- Unsafe, inadequate **housing**
- Barriers to **educational achievement**
- Persistent generational **poverty**
- Deeply rooted **historical trauma**
- Societal and institutional **racism and discrimination**

These social and cultural contexts are shaped by a unique history that includes forced relocation; an intolerance of cultural beliefs, norms and practices; inconsistencies in federal policies enacted over several generations; unique environmental vulnerabilities; social narratives that exclude an accurate history of American Indian/Alaska Native people; a lack of understanding by public health practitioners and policymakers of federal Indian law, trust responsibility, sovereignty, self-determination and consultation policy; limitations in the quality of data and information available about American Indian/Alaska Native populations; environmental injustices.

All of these factors – compounded by geospatial challenges, inadequate national visibility and limited access or proximity to health care or medical services – reduce opportunities to achieve good health.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

There is hope. By acknowledging these social and cultural contexts, non-tribal partners can better address the resulting tribal public and environmental health concerns.

It is imperative that partners devise strategies and take action toward a healthier tomorrow for all. National nonprofit organizations, federal agencies and community groups can establish more effective relationships with tribal governments and tribal-serving organizations by:

- Learning and gaining confidence in working with tribal communities.
- Building awareness of social and cultural contexts
- Integrating tribal voices early and often.
- Building relationships with tribal governments and tribal-serving organizations in your region or area of work.
- Honoring cultural traditions and practices.
- Acknowledging historical trauma and tribal perspectives.
- Promoting policies that include and advance tribal public and environmental health.

Through efforts to build understanding of tribal public and environmental health issues and increase support for initiatives addressing these concerns, tribal communities can have a healthier future while preserving their cultural traditions and practices.



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## RESULTING TRIBAL PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

American Indian/Alaska Native people believe in providing sound environmental stewardship that preserves, perpetuates, protects and enhances natural resources and the ecosystem. The environmental injustices and lack of health equity that impact Indian Country need recognition, partners and action to remedy the deeply rooted social and cultural contexts that impact resulting tribal public and environmental health areas.



### Food Sovereignty and Access

Access to nutritious, local, safe and traditional foods is critical to the health of tribal nations. Denial of healthy foods as a result of loss of land and traditional food practices increases reliance on processed foods, ultimately increasing the prevalence of chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity.



### Infrastructure and Systems Development

Many tribes lack the capacity to develop public health service structures (i.e. systems, workforce, knowledge and policies) and the ability to conduct surveillance and produce unified data systems. Limited access to funding pathways complicates matters.



### Climate and Health

Climate change significantly impacts tribal communities and their way of life. Tribal populations have been displaced, resulting in a shortage of housing and a threat to traditional food sources, medicines and ceremonies.



### Resource Extraction

Resource extraction leads to contamination of tribal natural resources and living spaces; disconnection from the land resulting in the loss of traditions and cultural practices; contaminated foods; and social, spiritual and economic disintegration.



### Clean Air

Clean air is essential to life, yet some tribal communities suffer from poor air quality due to environmental tobacco smoke, mold, formaldehyde, insulation, fires, particulates, airborne toxins and radon. Consequently, many tribal members suffer from cancer, respiratory health problems and more.



### Clean Water

Many rural reservations are highly dependent on surface water sources, such as reservoirs, lakes and streams and groundwater. These water sources are susceptible to non-point source pollutants that enter waterways during heavy precipitation and storms, as well as contamination from resource extraction and industrial facilities.

To learn more, visit [www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/environmental-health/partners/think-tank](http://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/environmental-health/partners/think-tank)



#### About the Tribal Public and Environmental Health Think Tank:

The TPEH Health Think Tank is a work group composed of professionals with diverse backgrounds in tribal public and environmental health. The group is focused on promoting the voice of tribal communities across the country as a strategy to raise awareness about and achieve improvements in the unique environmental and public health challenges faced by the communities they serve. The Think Tank is convened by the American Public Health Association with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support.

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