

## WELLNESS

### Key Points:

- The federal government's trust responsibility to provide for the health and wellness of tribal citizens is mandated by treaties, statute, and federal doctrine.
- The health and wellness of tribal communities depends on a network of health, education, and wellness service providers, prevention coordination, and tribally-driven initiatives.

The survival and prosperity of tribal communities depend on the safety, health, and wellness of our citizens. Despite the federal government's trust responsibility to provide health care to American Indians and Alaska Natives, American Indians and Alaska Natives continue to experience the greatest health disparities in the United States when compared to other Americans. Shorter life expectancy and the disease burdens carried by American Indians and Alaska Natives exist because of inadequate education, disproportionate poverty, discrimination in the delivery of health services, and cultural differences. These are broad quality of life issues rooted in economic adversity, poor social conditions, and decades of historical trauma.

The health disparities for American Indians and Alaska Natives make it clear that more must be done to ensure adequate health care is provided in tribal communities. The life expectancy of American Indian and Alaska Natives is 4.2 less than the rate for all other populations in the United States. American Indians and Alaska Natives die at higher rates than other Americans from alcoholism (552 percent higher), diabetes (182 percent higher), unintentional injuries (138 percent higher), homicide (83 percent higher), and suicide (74 percent higher). Clearly, this data calls for a better funded Indian health care delivery system.

### Behavioral Health:

News about recent youth suicides in our communities makes behavioral health a top priority for tribal communities. American Indian and Alaska Native children and communities deal with complex behavioral health issues at higher rates than any other population. Many tribes recognize historical trauma as the root of the disproportionately high rates of depression, suicide, and reoccurring trauma from domestic violence and sexual assault in Indian Country. In 2007, the National Center for Health Statistics noted that American Indians and Alaska Natives experience serious psychological distress one and a half times more than the general population. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveal that the suicide rate for American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents and young adults from ages 15-34 is two and a half times the national average for that age group.

Unlike other groups where the suicide rate increases with age, American Indian and Alaska Natives rates are highest among the youth and decrease with age. Holistic behavioral and mental health services designed and implemented by and for American Indian and Alaska

Native people are needed to promote cultural strength and healing. New initiatives such as First Kids First and Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) are also critical to promoting wellness with our children and youth.

### **School Climate Listening Tour:**

In 2014, the Department of Education held its first-ever school environment listening tour hearing directly from students, schools, and communities on ways to better meet the unique educational needs of Native American students. The listening sessions focused on “school environment” including bullying, student discipline, and offensive imagery and symbolism. The tour was spearheaded by the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education and took place from October to November. A report on the climate listening tour that captures the comments from students is expected soon.

### **Food Sovereignty:**

The right for tribal governments to exercise sovereignty over their own traditional foods and other food resources is a critical component of ensuring the health and wellbeing of Native communities. American Indians and Alaska Natives since time immemorial have relied on their traditional foods; they are a part of Native history, culture and traditions and are the basis for traditional and customary lifeways. A clean, healthy environment, with intact, fully-functioning ecological and physical processes is essential to support and maintain the First Foods, but it has often been—and continues to be—damaged and degraded. Tribes need support from federal government to developing their own food codes, food policy councils, and exercising sovereignty over their foods. The federal government must listen to the voices and respond to the needs, traditions, and creativity of people who farm, forage, herd, hunt, gather, and fish and provide healthy food to the people, thereby strengthening food sovereignty for themselves and future generations.