

“Our Relatives Go Everywhere”

Key Learnings and Recommendations from the American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) Sexual Health Convening

NACCHOSM
National Association of County & City Health Officials

On June 6 and 7, 2023, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of STD Prevention (CDC/DSTDP), brought together public health representatives at the federal, state, local, and tribal level from across the country to discuss the extreme disparities in sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates in American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) communities. We gathered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the agenda can be found in Appendix 1.

Purpose

The goal of this meeting was to promote collaboration between city, county, and state health departments and the CDC with tribal health departments, Indian Health Service (IHS), Urban Indian Health Centers (UIHC), and 638 clinics¹ to provide the best possible STI prevention, treatment, and care to AI/AN people. We gathered to understand how STIs are being addressed in AI/AN communities, where there are unmet needs, and how partnership and collaboration can better move us forward to address STIs. The two-day meeting was designed around collaborative information sharing sessions to generate clear ideas for future partnership and next steps.

Background

American Indians and Alaska Natives experience significant health disparities originating from historical trauma suffered through violent colonialism, including war, displacement from ancestral lands, family separation, and bans on cultural and religious practices. Such trauma contributes to elevated risk of substance use, depression, and suicide, as well as learned stigma around sexuality and sexual health. Currently, many AI/AN individuals continue to experience racism, impoverishment, and lack of access to care, particularly for those many AI/AN people living in rural communities. These social determinants of health contribute to disparities in many health conditions, including for HIV, STIs, and for viral hepatitis. For example, in 2021, AI/AN showed the greatest increase in primary and secondary syphilis of any race/ethnicity in the U.S. since 2020, and now has the highest rate in 2021.² In 2020, the rate of reported new syphilis cases among AI/AN persons was nearly four times the rate among non-Hispanic White persons (26.9 versus 6.9 cases per 100,000, respectively). The rate was particularly alarming for AI/AN females, at over seven times greater than the rate among non-Hispanic White females (21.3 to 2.9 per 100,000). Nationally, from 2016 to 2020, the rate of reported congenital syphilis increased over 400% among AI/AN babies (37.7 to 190.6 cases per 100,000 live births) in 2020. In 2021, AI/AN populations were the only ones experiencing an increase in number of HIV diagnoses³. And national data indicates AI/AN people have the highest incidence of acute HCV infection and the highest HCV-related mortality rate of any race/ethnicity.⁴

Treaty relationships between sovereign tribes and the United States include every level of government (federal, state, local). In addition, American Indians and Alaska Natives, as citizens of the United States, are eligible to participate in all public, private, and state health programs available to the general population. Therefore, all jurisdictions have a responsibility to be engaged in providing care to tribal communities and AI/AN individuals—and to do so with cultural humility.

¹ 638 Clinics are also known as tribal contract or compact health centers, funded by Indian Health Service and operated by Tribes or Tribal organizations. Like Urban Indian Health Centers, they are outpatient health care programs and facilities that specialize in caring for American Indians and Alaska natives.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2021/default.htm>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/statistics/2020surveillance/hepatitis-c.htm>

Key Learnings

Health Service and Systems

- While IHS and other tribal facilities serve members of federally recognized tribes, sexual health networks are not determined by race/ethnicity. Prevention and care efforts for AI/AN communities are most effective when coordinated across jurisdictions and communities. Local health departments, especially those that border tribal communities and reservations, have an active role to play in providing these communities with high quality sexual healthcare.
- Sexual health and sexual health services are stigmatized across the AI/AN community, and stigma presents a barrier to care, especially in small, tightly knit communities where anonymity for those seeking services cannot be maintained.
- At the same time, midwives, doulas, and other traditional birth workers and healers have a potential role to play in STI prevention and treatment and especially for syphilis.
- Because so many AI/AN communities are rural and remote, models of service delivery outside of the clinic setting are needed: “street” medicine brings outreach workers and licensed clinicians out into the community to administer tests, treatments, and referrals where clients live and congregate; telehealth allows clients to access a clinician remotely via phone or videoconference; and self-collection or self-test kits can be made available via pharmacies, retail health clinics, or mail order.
- Similarly, such models are most effective if they are integrated and syndemic, with a panel of STI/HIV tests being offered if risk is identified.
- Fear of involvement by the authorities (police and child protective services) and possible child removal undermines a desire to engage in prenatal care for pregnant people who use drugs in AI/AN communities just like every other community.

Data Sovereignty/Sharing

- With state, local, tribal, and IHS agencies often overlapping in their mandate and service area, the question of “public health authority” is complex, particularly in terms of data reporting and sharing. In response, tribal epidemiology centers (TECs) have been established with authorization to access data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), including from CDC, and IHS. However, access to such data has been found to be variable⁵.
- At the local level, too often, even though tribes report mandated health data to state health departments, they are unable to access AI/AN specific data sets and analyses. And data that is held by tribal health departments may not be shared with states or IHS systems.
- Access to real-time patient level data across jurisdictions is critical to conduct effective case investigation and contact tracing to interrupt infectious disease transmission and assure treatment.

On the second day of the convening, the breakout groups (focusing on Data, Community Activities/Education, Clinical Services) offered recommendations, and presentations were delivered from the rapporteurs who represented several groups at the meeting (IHS, NACCHO, CDC, health departments, National Network of Prevention Training Centers, and tribal care providers). Based on these two sessions and what was heard over the course of the convening, the following recommendations were identified.

⁵ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104698>

Recommendations

Syphilis (including congenital syphilis) —

- Syphilis, and especially congenital syphilis, in AI/AN populations should be declared a public health emergency by the DHHS/CDC which would allow for more timely data-sharing.
- The AI/AN community must be included in congenital syphilis taskforces, review boards, and coordination meetings, and their provider communities and leaders must be included and engaged in times when actions like a “Dear Colleagues” or “Dear Provider” letters are being issued by state and local health departments/government. All relevant jurisdiction health departments should be sending “Dear Tribal Leader” letters about the emergency of syphilis in AI/AN communities.
- Access should be provided to syphilis registries by state and local health departments and until that is in place, there should be a solid, pre-determined contact to a live person within the relevant health departments to communicate syphilis data to tribes so that they can quickly conduct partner services.
- Testing for syphilis, especially syphilis in those who may be pregnant, must not be based on perceived “risk factors” and instead all individuals should be tested.
- Increases in funding must occur to be able to have enough staff to correctly address syphilis and do partner services.
- Continuing education on sexual health and specifically syphilis should be offered in person and virtually— including in settings targeting AI/AN providers (e.g., [Association of American Indian Physicians](#) (AAIP) Annual Conference) and with providers that serve AI/AN communities (e.g., health departments and emergency rooms in “border communities” outside of reservations).
- Direct funding to tribes to address STI rates is essential. This should include funding to allow for universal screening for syphilis (tailored to the specific Native community in need).
- The stigmatization of sexual health services must be combated collaboratively across all communities and legislatures.

Health System/Delivery —

- Support integration of services by leveraging HIV and other routine health screenings/visits to co-locate STI testing. Staff must be cross trained in HIV and STI testing, and facilities should be able to braid funding to test for both.
- For STIs overall, conversation should not focus on “risk factors” of an individual to determine when to test for STIs and which STIs to test for. Instead, conversation should focus on the impact of STI impact on the community and the need for proactive screening to occur to mitigate the impact.
- If a sexual history cannot be obtained, STI testing should be conducted in all settings. Without a sexual history, there is no ability to determine behaviors that would increase or decrease risk, so multi-site STI testing should be offered in clinical and non-clinical settings.
- Increase use of:
 - Mobile units and field-based activities where multiple health services are offered to decrease stigma associated with the delivery of sexual health services.
 - Syndemic care teams which allow for hiring of peers/community health workers/ Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) that can connect clients to one-shop services for HIV/STI/hepatitis/harm reduction services.
 - Express STI testing at tribal clinics, pharmacies, and in lab settings—this should be offered to clients who self-referred and for referrals made by clinicians, pharmacists, and nurses.
 - DIS with standing orders to bundle STI testing including gonorrhea, chlamydia, trichomonas, syphilis, and HIV.

- Field treatment for syphilis as well as field services allowing for testing and treatment for any partners also present on site. This should be available from as many types of staff as possible, including pharmacists, clinicians, and DIS.
- Mail-order STI/HIV testing options—especially those designed specifically for AI/AN communities.
- Telehealth for HIV, STI, PrEP services especially in rural areas and allow for those visits to be conducted over the phone rather than needing internet access.
- Three-site STI testing.
- Hire AI/AN staff at all levels and to do all work.
- There should be designated staff to confirm completion of treatment, and to provide support if needed for referrals for prenatal care and STI treatment.
- Local and state health departments should promote STI/HIV testing in emergency rooms—guidance should be given that if pregnancy or other relevant tests are being done, full STI testing should also be completed.
- State and local health departments, especially those that border tribal areas, must be engaged in providing health services for tribal communities and doing so with cultural humility. They should also be sharing recommendations and funding opportunities with those tribes and offering access to any best practices that have already been developed.
- There must be an increase in rapid testing across all healthcare settings but especially in health departments, emergency rooms, and in correctional facilities, so that treatment can be provided before an individual with an STI leaves the premises. Providers in these settings must be trained on syphilis staging so that they can determine whether a patient needs one or more bicillin shots.

Data Sovereignty/Sharing ---

- Data sovereignty is a necessity—tribes must have the ability to keep, own, access, and analyze data from their tribes.
- State and local health departments must provide data access to tribes/IHS/Urban Indian Health Centers/638 clinics. It must be a priority for state and local health departments to give access to line-level data on syphilis and congenital syphilis to tribes and IHS as a public health emergency. There should be clarifications issued on 25 USCA 1602 and who is a “public health authority.” All tribal epidemiology centers should have access to Epi Data Mark. There should be an ECR or EHR mechanism which shares data back to the tribal communities from which it came.
- CDC should require states to share data with tribes; CDC could make state epidemiology funding contingent on developing data-sharing agreements. CDC’s data modernization should be leveraged for IHS/tribal data access. CDC ELC funding mechanism should require the reporting of data to tribes as a condition of eligibility for supplemental funding.
- There should be intergovernmental training on epidemiology needs for state and local governments and their tribal/IHS/UIHC counterparts, highlighting the importance of race/ethnicity markers, how data is shared, etc. IHS data should be used for matching to correct race misclassification.

Inter-governmental Collaboration ---

- There is an essential need for state and local health department officials and their staff to better understand how AI/AN individuals can and do receive care via the IHS, urban Indian health organizations, and tribal health systems.
- It cannot be, and is not, only the responsibility of IHS, urban Indian, and tribal health systems to provide care for AI/AN individuals, especially when it comes to sexual health care.
- Local and state health departments should have disease investigation staff imbedded in tribal communities/health organizations. Those individuals should be from the communities that they are serving. They should also be representative of gender diverse communities.

- True collaboration/partnership is needed and should include:
 - Regularly scheduled meetings between tribal health directors and clinical managers, and staff of state and local health departments that serve the communities.
 - Support for field/clinic staff to speak to local or bordering tribal leaders, health directors, and clinical staff.
 - Regular meetings between state and local health departments and tribal epidemiology centers, tribes, and 638 clinics to best understand the health states of the communities. Data access is key to this partnership.
 - Financing—a reciprocal care model should be developed that would allow individuals in tribal communities and those counties surrounding them to go to county, state, or tribal public health providers and those entities should be able to be paid for providing those services.
 - Tribal communities being included in the development and execution of all community health plans.
 - Communities of practice which engage tribes, IHS, locals, and states together to tackle issues such as syphilis/congenital syphilis.

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Appendix 1: Agenda

Tuesday, June 6

8:00am	Breakfast (provided)	
9:00am	Welcome	Cherokee Nation
9:10am	Why Are We Here: Panel Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is here and why? • Health Disparities in AI/AN communities, and how AI/AN access sexual health services • Indigi-HAS 	Facilitator: Lucy Slater, NACCHO Presenters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebekah Horowitz, NACCHO • Jessica Leston, Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB) • Rick Haverkate, Indian Health Service (IHS)
10:20am	Break (snack provided)	
10:35am	Situational Awareness: Large Group Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are state and local health departments working with AI/AN populations and AI/AN healthcare providers to address sexual health? • How ARE local/state HDs working well with AI/AN communities? (i.e., success stories) • What are some barriers/challenges experienced by AI/AN communities in working with state and local health departments? • Proposed solutions (i.e., how SHOULD jurisdictions work with AI/AN communities?) • Are there special considerations for working with specific populations within your communities that need to be kept in mind? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justice-involved • Pregnant people • Adolescents • PWUD • Rural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator: Rebekah Horowitz, NACCHO
11:30am	Breakout Groups: What is happening now? What are the current challenges? Where do you see opportunities? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clinical Services 2. Community activities/education 3. Data 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clinical Services Facilitator: Andrew Yu, IHS 2. Community Activities and Education Facilitator: Michelle Singer, NPAIHB 3. Data Facilitator: Carla Britton, Alaska Native Health Consortium (ANHC)
12:30pm	Lunch (provided)	
1:15pm	Partner Services: Large Group Discussion	Facilitator: Cody Knight, Southern Plains Indian Health Board (SPIHB)
2:00pm	Overview of Syphilis/CS in Indian County and Large Group Discussion	Facilitator: Cody Knight, Southern Plains Indian Health Board (SPIHB)
3:30pm	Break	
3:45pm	Point-of-Care (POC) Testing: Large Group Discussion	Facilitator: Andrew Yu, IHS
4:15pm	Breakouts [Regional] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are successes and challenges in your region around addressing sexual health? • Are there special considerations based on geography, populations, politics? • How could state/local HDs support/collaborate with you? • What have you learned today so far that you want to take back with you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Region 10 (AK, WA, OR, ID) • Regions 9 and 6 (CA, NV, AZ, NM, TX, OK) • Regions 8, 7, and 5 (MT, ND, SD, WY, CO, NE, IA, KS, MO, MN, WI, IL, IN, MI, OH) • Regions 1, 2, 3, and 4 (all remaining states)
5:00pm	Adjourn	

8:00am	Breakfast (provided)	
9:00am	Concurrent Sessions: What are our recommendations? 1. Data 2. Community Education/Awareness and Partner Services 3. Clinical Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Data Facilitator: Ashley Hoover, NPAIHB 2. Community Education/Awareness and Partner Services Facilitator: Becki Jones, Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains 3. Clinical Services Facilitator: Allison Finkenbinder, Denver Prevention Training Center
10:30am	Break (snack provided)	
10:45am	Report Back	Facilitator: Sonia Almonte, NACCHO
11:30am	Rapporteur presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amy DeLong, Ho-Chunk Nation • Oskian Kouzouian, IHS • Melinda Salmon, CDC • Kamala Stiner, Alaska HD • Joseph Cherabie, St. Louis Prevention Training Center • Julia Zigman, NACCHO
12:30pm	Technical Assistance and Closing	Facilitator: Lucy Slater, NACCHO

Appendix 2: Participant Invite List

Kristi	Aklestad	Montana DPHHS
Sonia	Almonte	National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), HIV, STI, Harm Reduction Program
Sarah	Alsop	Washington University STI/HIV Prevention Training Center (PTC)
Christy	Altidor	National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD)
Teri	Anderson	Denver PTC
Tranita	Anderson	CDC, National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)
Elizabeth	Antone	Gila River
Kevin	Ard	Ratelle PTC
Faith	Baldwin	Arizona Department of Health Services
Lindley	Barbee	CDC/NCHHSTP/DSTDP
Nicolas	Barton	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Meggin	Bean	Muscogee Creek Nation Department of Health
Kurt	Begaye	Albuquerque Area Indian Health Board, Inc.
Taleisa	Benally	Changing Woman Initiative
Gina	Benson	St. Croix Tribal Health Clinic
Cheryl	Bighorn-Savior	Fort Peck Tribal Health
Sally	Bouse	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Robbie	Bright	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Scott	Brill	Maricopa County
Carla	Britton	Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium/Alaska Native Epidemiology Center
Tyler	Broghammer	Oyate Health Center/Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Health Board
Zandt	Bryan	Washington State Department of Health
Aaron	Bull	Navajo Nation Department of Health
Karen	Buller	Southern Indian Health Council, Inc.
Donald	Chee	National Native HIV Network
Joseph	Cherabie	St. Louis STI/HIV PTC
Donna	Clampitt	Ft Peck Tribal Health
Ryan	Close	Whiteriver Service Unit

Alexandra	Coor	CDC/NCHHSTP/DSTDP
Dana	Cropper	California Prevention Training Center
Martha	Curry	National Council of Urban Indian Health
Shawnell	Damon	Navajo Area IHS
Amy	DeLong	Ho-Chunk Nation
Maxine	Delorme	Turtle Mountain Public Health Department
Stephanie	Devlin	Maricopa County Department of Health
Whitney	Dickson	Cass Lake IHS
Linda	Drach	Oregon Health Authority
Anathea	Edleman	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation (TCRHCC)
Mason	Emert	Choctaw Nation Health Services Authority
Mark Anthony	Faustino	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation
Molly	Feder	Cardea Services
Allison	Finkenbinder	Denver Prevention Training Center
Shannon	Fleg	Changing Woman Initiative
Cassandra	Fonseca	Turtle Mountain Public Health Department
Jessica	Frasure-Williams	California Department of Public Health
Keanu	Frazier	Winslow Indian Health Care Center
Julia	Freimund	Infectious Diseases Education & Assessment Program (IDEA), UW
Victoria	Freire	NACCHO, Rural Health
Kevin	Gaines	Navajo Area IHS
Andrew	Gans	New Mexico Department of Health
Richard	Haverkate	Indian Health Service
Priscilla	Haynes	Tulsa City-County Health Department
Ashley	Hoover	Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board
Jeanee	Hoover	STD/HIV Prevention Training Center at Johns Hopkins
Rebekah	Horowitz	NACCHO, HIV, STI, Harm Reduction Program
Staceee	Hoye	Oklahoma City-County Health Department
Katherine	Hsu	Mass. Dept. of Public Health / Boston Univ. Med. Ctr.
Christin	Hullinger	Cherokee Nation Public Health
Jonathan	Iralu	Indian Health Services
Rose	James	Urban Indian Health Institute/SIHB
Stephanie	Jay	Turtle Mountain Public Health Department
Mattee	Jim	First Nations Community HealthSource
Rebecca	Jones	Planned Parenthood of Rocky Mountains- Native Community Health Network
Destiny	Kelley	National Network of STD Clinical Prevention Training Centers (NNPTC)
Jolene	Keplin	Tribal Health
Joshua	Knight	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Oskian	Kouzouian	Indian Health Service
Kelsey	LaCoote	Passamaquoddy Indian Township Health Center
Jane	Langemeier	Winnebago Public Health
Rikki	LaRoche	Choctaw Nation
Rickey	Lawson	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation
Jessica	Leston	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation
Philana	Liang	Washington University in St. Louis
Jodie	Liebe	Iowa HHS Division of Public Health
Bradah	Littlefield	Muscogee Creek Nation
Lachyna	Locklear	National Indian Health Board
Michael	Lopez	Pima County Department of Health
Evelina	Maho	National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH)

Yuleta	Marta	Wind River Family and Community Health Care
Stella	Martin	New Mexico Department of Health
Kayla	Mason	Navajo Department of Health
Kimberly	Matulonis Edgar	Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Division of Public Health
Candice	McNeil	Southeast STI/HIV PTC
Daniel	Molina	Chickasaw Nation Department of Health
Mayra	Mollo	Arizona Department of Health Services
Lector	Morales	Urban Indian Health Institute
Rachel	Morse	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Michelle	Murtaza-Rossini	Tulsa City-County Health Department
Wendy	Nakatsukasa-Ono	Cardea
Jodene	Nerva-Chee	Changing Woman Initiative
Lavinia	Nicolae	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Melanie	Ogleton	Cardea
Meghan	O'Connell	Great Plains Tribal Leaders Health Board
William	Patterson	Oklahoma State Dept. of Health
Arika	Perry	Navajo Area Indian Health Service
Laura	Potter	Cardea
Amy	Radford	University of Washington STD PTC
Terra	Raxter	Tsalagi Public Health
Amanda	Reed	Muscogee (Creek) Nation Department of Health
Hilary	Reno	St. Louis STI/HIV PTC
Ashley	Ringwood	New Mexico Department of Health
Kaitlin	Ritchie	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Anne	Rompalo	Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Judith	Rosenberger	Hennepin County Public Health
Melinda	Salmon	CDC/NCHHSTP/DSTDP
Olivia	Scott	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Rebecca	Scranton	Arizona Department of Health
Rachel	Sharber	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Aimee	Shipman	Idaho Department of Health and Welfare
Michelle	Singer	Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board- NW Tribal Epi Center
Bobbi	Six	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Lucy	Slater	NACCHO, HIV, STI, Harm Reduction Program
Dollie	Smallcanyon	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation
Krishanya	Smith	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation
Atonbara	Sowemimo	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Amanda	Spencer	Cherokee Nation Public Health
Jessica	Steinke	New York City STD/HIV Prevention Training Center
Kamala	Stiner	State of Alaska Department of Health
Jolianne	Stone	Oklahoma State Department of Health
Melanie	Taylor	CDC, Division of HIV Prevention
Lisa	Toahty	Oklahoma City Indian Clinic
Terrance	Todome	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Maria	Vega	Indian Health Service, Fort Peck
Hannah	Warren	Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
Katherine	White	Southeast Prevention Training Center
Erinn	Williams	Oklahoma State Dept. of Health
Samantha	Williams	CDC/NCHHSTP/DSTDP
Jennifer	Williamson	Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
Jamie	Wilson	Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation

Michelle	Womack	Cherokee Nation Public Health
Melissa	Wyaco	IHS-Navajo Area Office
Marilyn	Yellowman-Baloo	Phoenix Indian Medical Center
Andrew	Yu	Indian Health Service
Julia	Zigman	NACCHO, HIV, STI, Harm Reduction Program
Trinity	Guido	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board