



March 24, 2022

United States House of Representatives
Office of Chairman McGovern

Dear Chairman James McGovern,

NATIVE HEALTH submits the following comments for the United States House of Representatives Rules Committee Chairman McGovern visit on August 6, 2021.

NATIVE HEALTH

NATIVE HEALTH is a Federally Qualified Health Center and Urban Indian Health Program in Phoenix, Arizona, providing primary medical, dental, behavioral health, WIC, and wellness programs to urban Native Americans and other underserved populations. NATIVE HEALTH has been in existence for 44 years and provides services to over 20,000 individuals per year, resulting in 100,000 encounters. NATIVE HEALTH has three clinical sites, four WIC clinics, and two food pantries.

NATIVE HEALTH's Pre-Pandemic Food Insecurity Programs

NATIVE HEALTH has a long history of addressing food insecurity and was recognized by the National Association of Community Health Centers in addressing food insecurity for the urban Native American and underserved community. NATIVE HEALTH began nine years ago providing Summer Food Service Programs (SFSP) Kid's Cafe in partnership with St. Mary's Food Bank for children waiting or visiting NATIVE HEALTH's medical, dental, behavioral health, and WIC clinics. This program ensures that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. Since that time, NATIVE HEALTH has steadily and carefully added to its nutrition programs. Pre-pandemic food insecurity programs included: Summer Food Service Program, Backpack program (for families with children under age 18 receive a weekly bag of food), Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for qualifying low income seniors that receive a monthly box of food and cheese; Food for Thoughts (targeted for pre-diabetic and diabetic community members and patients); NATIVE HEALTH's Traditional Garden produce distribution; Read it and Eat (a program focusing on introducing and teaching children and parents about affordable healthy eating and the benefit of reading with their child at an early age); TEFAP commodity items distributed to individuals and families through one of NATIVE HEALTH's locations. NATIVE HEALTH's food programs were providing 500-1,000 meals per month pre-pandemic.

COVID

COVID has had a devastating effect on the Native American community with Native Americans being disproportionately affected with this illness. We have seen firsthand how difficult this has been for the families and community we serve. Many of our families have lost their jobs, homes, health, and other social determinants of health. NATIVE HEALTH stepped up immediately to help in every way we could. We began providing COVID testing as soon as it became available to the public with hundreds lining up for tests. We continued our commitment to the Native American and underserved community with rolling out over 19,000 vaccines in various places, including their communities, so everyone felt safe and welcome. NATIVE HEALTH continues to support the community with distributing masks and test kits. We have made a commitment to the community to help in every way. We know that food insecurity has been an issue and due to inflation, families are feeling this more. We have cobbled together various programs and funding streams to try to serve the community. NATIVE HEALTH has seen homeless individuals line up every day for food. The community depends on us, and we are doing our best to serve them.

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Current Food Insecurity

In addition to the current distribution programs mentioned above, NATIVE HEALTH added an Urban Native American Senior Food Box Program and greatly expanded food distribution which includes a high proportion of homeless individuals. Since COVID began, over 150,000 meals have been distributed to the community.

Our CEO has made a commitment to take care of our employees. Over 25% of our employees and families are food insecure. We provide a weekly bag of supplemental food and cleaning items to assist them. Without their hard work and dedication, they couldn't serve the front line.

In addition, we have worked with various partners to meet the increasing demand for food. Food banks, corporations, private donors, and others have helped NATIVE HEALTH increase our food distribution and we can barely meet the need.

NATIVE HEALTH's Traditional Garden uses traditional farming methods and much of the food harvested is distributed to the community. NATIVE HEALTH also distributed hundreds of Indigenous Food Boxes (utilizing local Indigenous farmers) to connect with the community and support our Indigenous farming community and producers. As families could not safely venture out, we provided online Indigenous healthy cooking classes and provided ingredients to make these at home. We have had thousands of views on our Facebook page, mailed thousands of boxes, and supported our families and the Indigenous chefs and producers. A concerted effort to use healthy, traditional foods that make an ancestral connection make our food programs stand apart from others. Additional funding allowed us to provide 600 Holiday Food Boxes the past two Christmas'. Holiday food boxes included turkeys, hams, produce, and items to make holiday meals.

As our COVID funding expires, we are faced with how we will address food insecurity. The USDA waivers allowed NATIVE HEALTH to provide grab-and-go meals for children utilizing the Summer Food Service Program (Kid's Café). Once the waivers expire, we are concerned that families will not be able to utilize this program due to lack of transportation, excessive heat in Arizona, and other factors.

What can the Federal Government do to support NATIVE HEALTH and the community we serve?

We ask that the Federal Government support our work. This can be done through additional funding, approving meals can be given out as a grab-and-go model rather than congregate setting, increasing food programs for low-income seniors, and more. Waivers allowed NATIVE HEALTH's Food Distribution programs to innovate and expand access during COVID, but we hope things continue to improve and not revert to pre-pandemic rules when the waiver expires. We are concerned for the children and the community. Children and families should not have to worry about eating or having a place to sleep or gas in the car.

For more information on NATIVE HEALTH's Food Programs please contact Susan Levy, slevy@nachci.com, (602) 279-5262 x 3111.