

The State of Native Health in Mendocino

By Rebecca Wald

Today, Mendocino County has nine federally recognized Indian Reservations, the fourth most of any county in the United States. Sadly, the historical mistreatment of American Indians nationwide did not escape Mendocino County and has left a legacy of economic and health challenges that continue to show in health disparities throughout the county. Contributing factors to the poor health conditions of Native American Peoples have roots in the turbulent history of trauma and the U.S. government's mismanagement of Native American life through health and economic policies.

The economic standing and health of Mendocino County's American Indian population is consistently lower than the county as a whole. According to Healthy Mendocino statistics (<http://www.healthymendocino.org/>), the per-capita income of Mendocino's Indians is \$12,150 per year, barely half of the county average of \$23,179. Similarly, 33.7 percent of Mendocino County's Indian families and 48.3 percent of its Indian children live below the poverty line, much higher than any other racial group. In addition, Mendocino's Native population has high rates of obesity, with 84.6 % of adults being obese or overweight. Finally, sadly, Native Americans have a child abuse incidence rate of 67 out of 1000 compared to the county average of 19.4 children out of 1000. And on a national level, according to census records, American Indians and Alaskan Natives have a life expectancy that is 5.2 years lower than the U.S. all-races population.

These health disparities have roots in the traumatic history of Native Peoples, including the federally-driven systematic occupation of Indian lands; enslavement of many tribal members; and raids against their settlements that led to the Mendocino War in 1859, during which hundreds of Indians were killed. Mendocino County witnessed some of the most serious atrocities in the extermination of the California Native American tribes who originally lived in the area (Yuki, Pomo, Cahto, and Whintum, among others). In fact, this historical trauma has manifested in what has been called a 'cultural breakdown' as Mendocino County Indians then grew up in a culture not of their ancestors. Alcohol, which soldiers brought during this turbulent period, has caused major issues within Native communities. Additionally, the introduction of commodity foods (by the federal government), which in many cases serve as a Native families' only food source, has propelled Natives to the highest percentage of diabetes of any other racial group due to high percentages of obese individuals. Natives were hunters and gatherers, known for their fruitful farming and hunting; differing starkly from the current commodity food programs of today's reservations.

Similarly, the U.S. government has controlled health care access for Native Americans for generations through assimilation tactics, forced isolation on reservations, treaty brokering that promised health care in exchange for land, and federal legislation such as the Indian Reorganization Act. The trail of government policy changes toward Native Peoples culminated in the Termination Act, which ended some Native Americans status

as tribal citizens, making them ‘normal Americans’. This left a confusing, unstable system for health education and access now that Natives were told they were no longer Native. Post Termination Act, all federally recognized Native American and Alaskan Natives are entitled to health care, but the Indian Health Service (IHS) must provide that care, either through IHS-run hospitals and clinics or through tribal health services contracts.

The IHS is a health-care delivery system, not an insurance entity. This means that American Indians are entitled to health services at any IHS facility. Any specialty visits, or care needed outside an IHS entity must be covered by insurance or IHS ‘compact dollars,’ a lump sum of money that IHS clinics receive to fund out-of-IHS network care for its Native patients. To further complicate matters, IHS-run hospitals and clinics serve any registered Indian/Alaska Native regardless of the tribe or income, but tribal-contract health care facilities prioritize their tribal members, with other qualified Indians/Alaska Natives being offered care on a space-available basis.

This policy makes it difficult for an Indian who leaves his/her tribal home for education or employment to receive the health care services to which he/she is legally entitled. An IHS fact sheet clarifies that Indians are also eligible to apply for low-income health care coverage provided by state and local governments, such as Medi-Cal. Additionally, IHS collected \$267 million from third-party payers (such as Medicaid) in 2007 and an estimated \$780 million in 2008

In Mendocino County, two major clinics operate via Indian Health Service dollars: Consolidated Tribal Health Project and Round Valley Indian Health Center. In addition, Sonoma County Indian Health Project runs an outreach clinic in Manchester/Point Arena. Though these clinics are specifically designed to meet the needs of the American Indian population, non-Natives are also invited to seek services at these locations. The Round Valley Indian Health Center provides primary care services to 3,000 people on the Round Valley Reservation and in the greater Covelo area. Consolidated Tribal Health Center serves members of nine reservations in the Mendocino county area.

Issues within the Native American population are not simple, considering both the already complex reality of the American health care system and the traumatic history the Native Peoples have experienced. The significant health disparities among County residents needs to be part of the conversation as we seek to improve health and well-being in Mendocino County. Health in Mendocino County will only be as good as the health of all its people. Including cultural sensitivity and an understanding of specific needs of its Native Peoples, is an important element in propelling significant long-term change in the economic and health status of Mendocino County.

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