

race equity champions

In this interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from the field about how state and local human services leaders are working to embed a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. In this edition, APHSA focuses on the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP-Education (SNAP-Ed) programs and its engagement with Tribal Nations. SNAP-Ed is the nutrition education and promotion branch of SNAP and aims to support people in making healthy choices through direct education, social media campaigns, policy, systems, environmental change, and more. Carrie Lindquist (SNAP-Ed Grant Manager), Kathy Bruen (SNAP Manager), and Alicia Smith (Economic Assistance and Employment Supports Deputy Director, former American Indian Advisor) have advanced this work in Minnesota and agreed to offer their collective thoughts on its impact and necessity.

APHSA extends its gratitude to the Minnesota Department of Human Services for sharing their story.

Question: How does the state of Minnesota (MN) honor tribal sovereignty with the Tribal Nations in Minnesota relative to the Tribes administering SNAP and SNAP-Ed?

Answer: MN DHS recognizes that Tribal Nations are sovereigns, meaning each Tribal Nation is unique and they have a right to self-govern. Because of this, DHS operates in a government-to-government relationship with the Tribal Nations that honors and respects Tribal sovereignty. To that extent, SNAP-Ed within the state has shifted our grant-making structure, contracting directly with eight Tribal Nations to operate SNAP-Ed programming by and for their communities. MN DHS consults, with the assistance of our Native American Advisor and Liaisons, Tribal Councils, and department managers to develop and approve SNAP-Ed program plans. We foster communication among all grantees, and Tribes write their own

SNAP-Ed plans—setting the direction of work within SNAP-Ed guidance that meet the needs of local communities.

An example of how DHS honors tribal sovereignty with the SNAP program is that for each Tribal Nation that has expressed an interest in administering SNAP, DHS has worked with the Tribe to meet the federal merit requirement. Through education, DHS staff knows the Tribes are sovereigns, and because of their sovereign status, state laws are not applicable to Tribes. DHS staff has worked with Tribes to uphold these examples to create an awareness that some federal laws are not applicable to Tribal Nations. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is not applicable to Tribal Nations because there is an Indian Civil Rights Act passed in 1968. Or Tribal Nations as sovereigns can have hiring preferences prioritizing American Indians

which would not be in violation of the federal merit principles.

Q: Given the dark history of the government's treatment of American Indians, how has Minnesota been able to establish and maintain trusting relationships with Tribal Nations in the state allowing tribes to implement SNAP and SNAP-Ed?

A: For any program, whether it be SNAP or SNAP-Ed, establishing trusting relationships with Tribal Nations takes time! In Minnesota, the 11 Tribal Nations are spread from the very top of the state all the way to its southern borders, overlapping several counties. When working with Tribal Nations, sometimes a bridge builder, such as a Tribal Liaison, is needed to help establish a connection. It is also important to travel to the Tribal Nations. Taking the time to meet with Tribal partners in their communities and truly listening to hear about the work occurring and their hopes for growth and, where and when applicable, how the work can translate into United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) policies

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and programs. This requires being very intentional about our efforts, having open communication, a willingness to learn, and following through. We, as state of Minnesota staff, have made time to walk with the Tribes so we can implement the programs together. Many of these efforts have led to strong working relationships built on mutual trust and respect.

Q: Can you share about any challenges when working with Tribal Nations to implement SNAP-Ed or SNAP?

A: SNAP-Ed's Guiding Principles require that, "the Program must use evidence-based, behaviorally focused interventions and maximize its national impact by concentrating on a small set of key population outcomes supported by evidence-based multi-level interventions." This is a huge barrier in working with Tribal communities as there are very few culturally relevant evaluated curriculums and/or interventions for American Indians. When there are evidence-based curriculums developed, they are created for a particular Tribe that may not reflect the cultural way of life of other Tribes. For example, in Oklahoma there is a curriculum called Eagle Adventures. While it is a culturally relevant curriculum for American Indians, it was designed for the Chickasaw Tribe, which has different customs from the tribes here in Minnesota. MN DHS emphasizes and recognizes the importance of culturally driven and community-designed experiential learning across all grantees. This philosophy can be seen in action in all interventions in the statewide work plan—most powerfully in the Tribal SNAP-Ed Program work plans. MN Tribal Programs and U of M Extension use evidence-based curricula wherever possible and work both internally and externally with local and regional partners to develop, pilot, and evaluate

new curricula to better serve their communities—especially in American Indian communities.

Some challenges with the SNAP program come from the fact that DHS used to have programs administered by the counties. As Tribes began to administer services such as SNAP, many of the 11 Tribal Nations' geographic and service area overlapped into multiple counties. This can create issues with things such as Time Limited participants where the SNAP participants on Tribal land might be waived, but not the county off Tribal land that is still within the Tribe's service area.



Lindquist



Bruen



Smith

There are some misunderstandings, misperceptions, and unawareness of Tribal Nations and American Indians. There is a need for more education and awareness of American Indians, Tribal Nations, sovereignty, and how to partner with Tribes to create equity and access.

Q: Given the historical and structural inequalities that plagued tribal nations, can you talk about your procurement practices and how you ensure that Tribal Nations have access to resources?

A: How one allocates resources, whether it be time, treasure, or talent, speaks to the priorities.

At DHS, we do not just say the word equity and access and not change our practices in creating access. We have been intentional to allocate resources, whether it be staff time, increasing knowledge of American Indians amongst staff, or financial resources to the Tribal Nations. Additionally, supporting internal Tribal procurement policies and practices is critical. In SNAP-Ed we respect and uphold the practices to procure local and traditional foods to continue to adapt initiatives to be culturally centered.

For example, with the SNAP-Ed within the state of Minnesota we've

shifted our grant-making structure, contracting directly with eight Tribal Nations to operate SNAP-Ed programming by and for their communities.

Another way DHS offers resources and support to the Tribal Nations with SNAP and SNAP-Ed is through an American Indian Advisor. The American Indian Advisor position is elevated to report to the Deputy Director and sits on the leadership team within the Division. The American Indian Advisor works across programs, including SNAP and SNAP-Ed, to provide guidance on the American Indian worldview so we can raise the profile of American Indians for better relationships, increased access to services, and equitable outcomes related to anti-poverty and nutrition programs.

Q: MN DHS supports tribal nations in improving food access. Can you share any promising practices or strategies that you are using to support tribes in creating access to SNAP, SNAP-Ed, and beyond?

A: At DHS, there is periodically a scan of our food programs to identify which Tribal Nation is administering the food program, including SNAP-Ed and SNAP. Using this information, a grid has been created that provides a visual aid to show where we have coverage and where we have opportunities to create access for Tribal Nations to administer the food programs we manage.

With the on-set of the pandemic, there was an illumination of the food inequities and opportunities to create access. In 2019, Governor Walz established a statewide Food Security Work Group focused on programs and populations such as food shelves, food banks, food for children, and in recognition of tribal sovereignty and the unique status of American Indians, there was a focus on American Indians so that no Minnesotan was put in harm's way while accessing food.

The whole focus of the American Indian Food Security Work Group was to identify gaps and opportunities to utilize programming to meet those

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nation's largest incentive program, Vax for the Win, which drove vaccinations in the populations most affected by health inequities. In fact, the incentive program alone drove a 33 percent increase in vaccinations and a 10 percent increase in the Latino community.

Provider Partnerships in Action


Within 17 days of launching My Turn, mass vaccination sites could administer 10,000 vaccines per day. As data and insights took shape, My Turn expanded to include available inventory, eligibility expansions, near real-time user feedback, equity metrics, and vaccination rates. These efforts drove significant cross-sector adoption. The number of LHJs

onboarded to My Turn for COVID vaccine distribution rapidly increased from two to 61, and vaccinations given using the My Turn system skyrocketed from 93 to 95,844 per day in just the first three months following the launch.

All told, the My Turn team has partnered with 30,000 clinics, including public and private healthcare providers and pharmacies statewide, as well as with the California Office of Emergency Services, the National Guard, Veterans' Affairs, and other health and government organizations. My Turn now serves as the integration point between the public and healthcare providers.

Having this "front door" for vaccination appointments and information—built with experience and

communications strategies—helped CDPH save the lives of Californians. In fact, the increase in vaccinations helped the state shift from the second highest to the lowest case rate in the United States.

The foundation of public trust and powerful partnerships continues to support positive outcomes. California is now expanding My Turn to support flu vaccine distribution and management, and distribution of the monkeypox vaccine. 

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needs. Some successes include a direct allocation of funding to Tribal Nations with broad parameters tied to food access and support. There has been an increase in program access with the Emergency Food Assistance Program from two Tribal Nations to four and an increase in the elder food support from six Tribal Nations to nine.


Within SNAP-Ed, Tribal programs are driven immensely by culture and traditional practices. We do what we can and where we can to support these program adaptations and encourage the use of locally sourced and grown food to use in programming. Additionally, food sovereignty is an elevated initiative within all Tribal SNAP-Ed programs. This initiative is supported through gardening activities, farmers markets on reservations,

and active involvement with food sovereignty committees, which help support healthy traditional food access to the community.

Q: For your peers in other human services agencies who are earlier in their own journey of addressing racial and systemic inequalities in service delivery, what words of advice can you share with them based on your own experiences and lessons learned from working with Tribal Nations?

A: Make the time. Make the time to establish, build, and maintain relationships. Make the time to learn about Tribal Nations in your state, including what programs and services the Tribe administers. Make the time to share information about programs and how

a Tribe might be able to administer the services. Make the time to provide support and technical assistance. All of this will create cross-learning, equity, and access.

An example of cross-learning and access is, in 2019, when DHS SNAP-Ed grant manager Carrie Lindquist made the time to attend the Native Nutrition Conference. At the conference, there was a joint presentation on the Farm to School program from the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and Lower Sioux Indian Community. Knowing the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe was already administering SNAP-Ed with a focus on early childhood, Lindquist saw this as an opportunity to hear and meet staff from the Lower Sioux Indian Community and share knowledge about SNAP-Ed. By attending the session, she was able to introduce herself and identify a contact at the Tribe. They then set up a meeting for her to share about the SNAP-Ed program and talk about opportunities for the Tribe to take what they were doing and align it with the program. With Lindquist's work, the Lower Sioux Indian Community is the first Dakota Nation out of four that is administering SNAP-Ed. 

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