



2008 Native Youth Agenda

Voices of Native Youth

Introduction

Native Youth Voices is a youth-led leadership development program initiated in 2007 by New Mexico Voices for Children (NM Voices) in partnership with Native Soul Youth and with funding from the United Way of Central New Mexico. Housed under NM Voices' Youth Link program, Native Youth Voices' mission is to identify issues of concern affecting Native-American youth in central New Mexico and pose solutions for those issues.

Over the past year, we worked with Native youth aged 14 to 17 in Bernalillo, Valencia and Sandoval Counties. Through our Native Youth Leadership Series of six multi-generational workshops,¹ we gathered a core of 30 Native-American youth. Besides participating in the workshops, these youth filled out a survey identifying the challenges and barriers they face as well as their hopes and goals.

The result of this work is the first Native Youth Voices' *Native Youth Agenda*. Our goal is for the *Native Youth Agenda* to be used as a tool to help community and state leaders understand the issues faced by Native youth in central New Mexico. We also hope to encourage them to make these issues a priority and work with us to build a brighter future for our children.



Issues

As a group, Native Americans have disproportionately poor health status and high disease rates compared to all racial groups in New Mexico, according to the 2007 American Indian Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Report Card.² Of the report's 19 health indicators, Native Americans rank last in nine. These are: prenatal care (late or no care); diabetes deaths; overweight among youth; not had pneumonia vaccination (adults 65+); pneumonia and influenza deaths; motor vehicle deaths; youth suicide; homicide; and alcohol-related deaths.³

Most disturbing is that Native-American youth have the highest suicide, poverty and obesity rates in New Mexico.



- One quarter of all Native youth in New Mexico have attempted suicide compared with 14.5 percent of all youth in New Mexico – a rate that is already twice the national average.⁴
- The poverty rate for Native-American children in New Mexico is nearly 15 percent higher than for all children in New Mexico.⁵ Children who live in poverty are less likely to have health insurance and receive well-child and preventative care than children who do not live in poverty.
- Of every 100 Native-American children in New Mexico, 17 are considered obese.⁶ Obesity puts a person at higher risk for other diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Native Youth Voices' survey also showed that not one of our 30 participants could speak their Native language fluently and most could understand very little. However, all 30 stated that they wanted to learn their Native language.

This data may be new to many people, but Native youth experience these disparities every day. The fact that disparity rates are rising – and in many cases are double or more than for other groups – highlights the already obvious need for

more resources for prevention and intervention programs.

However, prevention and intervention are not enough. Native people face a much larger problem – loss of culture, language and identity. Even though this cultural destruction began many years ago, today's Native youth do not escape the effects of it. Cultural knowledge and preservation are both key to beginning a much larger healing process in Native communities.

Solutions

To address these findings, we the youth of Native Youth Voices, make the following suggestions:

- We need to develop more strategic community-led wellness programs for youth and community to participate in and for which we feel ownership.
- We need to support and expand school-based health care in our communities for Native youth.
- We need more intergenerational communication to develop more access to and opportunities for the sharing of traditional knowledge.
- We need to make Native language programs a priority in our communities and create opportunities for urban Native youth to learn their Native language. We need to offer more resources and create opportunities like tutoring so Native youth can reclaim their language.
- We need more funding for the Native-American studies programs in the Albuquerque Public School District so urban Native students have a stronger support system.
- We need more consistent and meaningful roles in community decision-making and ongoing communication with community leaders.

Conclusion

Many Native-American youth do not like the reality that we see around us every day. We do not live in the world our ancestors created and would have hoped for us. They lived in a world where Native peoples had power, pride and were self-sufficient. We see the results of the loss of our culture, language and identity in the hopelessness that too often leads to alcoholism, drug use and suicide. Many Native youth also realize that change will not take place unless we take the lead. But we cannot do it alone. We need our tribal and state leaders to work with us. We need our voices to be heard.



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(Endnotes)

1 Workshop subjects included: peacemaking, communication, wellness, community organizing, and taking action.

2 2007 American Indian Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Report Card, New Mexico Department of Health, <http://www.health.state.nm.us/OPMH/2007ReportCard.pdf>

3 Native Americans share the lowest score with Hispanics in two categories: not had pneumonia vaccination (adults 65+) and homicide.

4 2005 New Mexico American Indian Health Status Report, New Mexico Department of Health, http://www.health.state.nm.us/pdf/health_status_report_final.pdf

5 2005 Native American Kids Count Report, New Mexico Voices for Children (revised 2008), http://www.nmvoices.org/attachments/nativeamericanreport_3_6_08.pdf

6 2008 American Indian Health Disparities in New Mexico, New Mexico Department of Health, <http://www.health.state.nm.us/OPMH/AmericanIndianReportCard.pdf>

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Unless noted otherwise, all photographs courtesy of Keegan King.



New Mexico Voices for Children is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization advocating for policies to improve the health and well-being of New Mexico's children, families and communities.