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Spirit of Community Health: Exploring Characteristics of Tribal Public Health System Organization and Performance

National health data reveal that American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people experience poorer health outcomes and have shorter average life expectancy than the overall U.S. population. Addressing the causes of poor health and early death requires interventions outside of a medical office – preventive services, chronic care management, community-based services – which are inherent to public health. Yet, Native American tribes often face challenges to improving public health, such as social inequities, cross-cultural and jurisdictional barriers, limited access to health care, and lack of parity in financial resources. It is imperative that Tribal health agencies are able to determine how they can improve tribal members' health through the delivery of essential public health services.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's "Public Health Services and Systems Research" grant program funded MPHI to conduct a study to help build an evidence base around how tribes organize and partner to deliver public health services. MPHI conducted an examination of a single tribal public health system, exploring how and through what relationships it delivered public health services, and assessing the key characteristics that addressed health disparities. Data sources included interviews and ecomaps with public health system partners, focus groups with community members, secondary data, and document review. The study followed the principles of tribal community-based participatory research and involved participants in creating and disseminating knowledge.

A great need for additional resources to support development of tribal public health laws and policies

- The importance of sustainable and flexible financing for tribal public health services
- The potential value of practice-based evidence that emphasizes community wisdom and culture
- Opportunities that exist for the public health field to learn from Tribes about the potential benefits and pitfalls of the integration of public health and health care
- Valuable insight that can be gained by having a research agenda for tribal public health systems and services

A full report of the results, a policy brief, and practitioners' toolkit can be found here: <https://www.mphi.org/tribalhealth/>