

COVID-19 Ravages the Navajo Nation: My Personal Experience

By Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds

When I visited my grandmothers at Navajo Mountain, Arizona on March 15, 2020, I did not know that it would be the last time I'd see them alive.

My two grandmothers were the younger sisters of my paternal grandmother, Estelle Neztosie Ketchum, who had passed in 2006. My husband, Edgar, and my daughter, Deezbaa, and I made our springtime pilgrimage to visit our Navajo/Diné family, check on the elders and children, and enjoy the idyllic landscape replete with red sand dunes, short cedar trees, deep canyons, blue skies, and the occasional animal or bird interrupting the silence.

As Indian people, we all internalize our relationships to the land, plants, and animals in different ways, so I am grateful that Navajo Mountain (known as Naatsis'áan which means 'head of mother earth') is always there for my return visit. I have always looked forward to seeing my family members, hearing the Diné language, and sharing coffee or tea with the ladies as we catch up on news and gossip.

My grandmother, Maryann Welch, who was in her early 80s (she was not born in a hospital and has no birth certificate), was recently described in her obituary as leading a simple rancher's life and tending to her flock of sheep and other animals. However, I remember her differently, perhaps, in a more personal way, as we often do with family members.

The stories that my deceased grandfather Bahe Ketchum (1919-2015), a World War II Veteran and Navajo Code Talker who served in the 6th Marine division from 1944-1946, painted a different picture for me over the years. He told me about how his great-grandparents defied the US Army by fighting, escaping and hiding in the canyons located near Navajo Mountain be-

cause they refused to be taken to Ft. Sumner, on the Navajo Long Walk (1863-1866), to be imprisoned and subjected to dehumanizing treatment. Others were not so fortunate. It was not until Bahe was of early school age that the white missionaries 'found him' (usually parents told their kids to hide in the canyons when strangers came around) and he was forced to attend a local boarding school and given the name 'Bahe Ketchum' by a teacher who was, incidentally, from Oklahoma.

This meant, to me, that my grandmother, Bahe's wife Estelle, was an excellent 'hider' because she never attended boarding school, or learned English, or received a new name from the white missionaries. All of this wonderful history came to the fore as I struggled (and still struggle) to understand and cope with the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Navajo people.

The statistics are staggering. According to the *Navajo Times* newspaper, as of Sunday evening, May 24, 2020, the Navajo Nation reported 4,689 positive COVID-19 (the disease is also known as Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19) cases and 153 deaths, which, effectively, pushed the tribe's healthcare system past its capacity. Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez stated that over 27,000 COVID-19 tests have been administered which means over 14% of the people living on



the Navajo Nation have been tested and approximately 21,611 of those tests yielded negative results. Approximately 1,400 individuals were also reported to have recovered from COVID-19. This means that approximately 1.6% of the Navajo population are infected with COVID-19.

According to the 2016 census, the number of members enrolled in the Navajo Nation is estimated at around 357,000 with 66% of the population living on the Navajo reservation with an average family size of four living in close quarters. The Navajo Nation spans parts of three states (Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico) and is approxi-

mately 27,000 square miles, which is roughly the size of Connecticut. This is why on May 6, 2020, CNN reported that it was one of the epicenters of the pandemic in the US, according to Dr. Deborah Birx of the White House coronavirus task force.

Recently, the Navajo Nation is said to have the highest per capita infection rate in the USA, surpassing New York and New Jersey. CNN also reports that the reasons for the large number of positive cases, and deaths, are historically tied to long-standing inequities such as: 1) Native communities suffer from high rates of heart disease and diabetes 2) Between 15 and 40% of

Navajo homes do not have clean running water (especially due to uranium mines poisoning the water supply) 3) Navajo homes are overcrowded and lack reliable electricity (especially due to coal strip mining resources providing other states with electricity). Knowing these historical facts means understanding what shapes Indian life and why Doctors Without Borders has sent medical professionals to the Navajo Nation where they plan to remain until the end of June.

According to a CBS report, Doctors Without Borders has teams in Afghanistan, Iran, Sierra Leone,

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Message From Your District Legislator

Cheyenne District 3 - Darrell Flyingman

I want to thank the editor of the *Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal Tribune* for keeping us informed of current issues and current updates of the COVID-19 virus. There remains a threat in Indian Country that the virus is still around and we must be cautious. We must follow the warnings of the experts. There may be a second wave of this virus, so let's be ready for it.

Many of our people have been complaining that we should receive the CARES funding as a per cap payment. Any monies we receive from the federal government always come with strings attached to the spending of federal money. I'm sure by now we understand that we must justify ALL expenditures by the tribe to the U.S. Treasury. Whether we like it or not, there are rules.

The governor and the legislature are developing plans to help our people by making payments of \$500 to the head of the family and an additional \$300 to each child of the family. An application is

being developed at this time with no qualification to receive this money. Remember all monies must be used for or related to the COVID-19 virus. Rent, food, and other emergencies needs for the family may be used. We ask that you retain the receipts in case the federal government audits the tribe.

Keep in mind that if the tribe is audited, the chances are, you may also be audited randomly. Hopefully, we will not have to pay the federal government back any money.

Food boxes have been delivered to families with correct addresses. Many of our tribal members have post office boxes or have moved without notifying the Election Commission of their new address. Please notify the Election Commission, the Per Capita office, the Elder Care Program with your new addresses so you won't miss out on any money sent out by the tribe.

I understand that any tribal member has the right to complain or gripe about



any issue with the tribe. All I ask is that you don't tell untruths; lies or spread false rumors and perjure yourself about tribal members. Just remember that you can be held accountable for your false remarks made on Facebook or any other social media sites.

The tribal leadership is doing what we can to help the tribe and keep us safe. Please don't try and divide the tribe. This is one time in our history that we need to come together and take care of each other. Please pray for us all.

Darrell Flyingman
Proud Cheyenne Warrior

Report: 'Grossly inaccurate' data used to divvy up relief funds for tribes

Joaquin Estus, *Indian Country Today*

The U.S. Treasury Department used outdated population numbers to determine how much money to give to tribes, despite having easy access to better figures, says a Harvard study

The U.S. Treasury Department relied on "grossly inaccurate" data in deciding how to divvy up billions of dollars in COVID-19 relief money for tribes, says a new Harvard study.

The agency ignored more up-to-date figures it required from tribes and instead went with outdated population data used by a federal housing program to distribute a portion of \$8 billion in funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, according to Professor Joseph Kalt, co-director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and one of several authors of the report released Monday.

Its "arbitrary and capricious" decision means some tribes that would have been eligible for millions or tens of millions of dollars instead are getting the minimum of \$100,000, Kalt said.

"What's kind of flabbergasting to us: Treasury, you have this data sitting right there. Why didn't you use it?" he said.

Congress allocated the \$8 billion for tribes in late March. A court later ruled some of the money should be held back for Alaska Native corporations in case they are deemed eligible.

But it opened the door for the federal government to begin distributing \$4.8 bil-

lion for federally recognized tribes.

On May 5, the secretaries of Treasury and Interior set a minimum of \$100,000 for each tribe.

They laid out their plans to use population data used by the Indian Housing Block Grant program to distribute the \$4.8 billion.

Kalt said the Treasury Department not only had easy access to more accurate numbers, it had asked for that data from tribes precisely to use in its decision-making.




Attempts to reach the Treasury Department for comment by phone and email Monday were not immediately successful.

Earlier this month, Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin and Interior Secretary David L. Bernhardt issued a joint statement saying they were pleased to begin making some relief funds available. "Our approach is based on the fair balancing of tribal needs," the statement said.

To qualify for a share of the relief money, tribes were asked how many enrolled citizens they have, how many acres of land they own, and how many people they employ. The departments of Interior and Treasury told tribes it needed that data to come up with the allocations of dollars to each tribe.

"If Treasury used the April submissions

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Venezuela and 66 other countries that are international conflict zones in the midst of medical crises. This is the first time the organization has ever dispatched a team in the US. The team sent to Navajo country includes two physicians, three nurse/midwives, a water sanitation specialist, two logisticians and a health promoter who specializes in community health education.

My grandmother Maryann, her son Larry Welch (who was a Gulf War Veteran and served in Operation Desert Storm in the 82nd Airborne Army Infantry), her sister Eva Dinehdeal, and Eva's daughter named Gloria all passed away within days of each other from complications associated with COVID-19.

The Navajo Times newspaper has documented since mid-March how local IHS clinics are overwhelmed with lack of enough qualified personnel like doctors and nurses, personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators, COVID-19 test kits and so forth. National news outlets like CNN and CBS have documented the

dire situation of the Navajo Nation regarding the lack of access to clean running water for people and their animals, dependable electricity, and healthcare and telecommunications infrastructure to aid in tracing, or tracking, those people that COVID-19 positive patients might have infected.

The reservation's rural geography also produces a 'food desert' where tribal members must travel more than 100 miles to purchase groceries, cleaning supplies, and the like. Additionally, Level One trauma facilities that can handle seriously ill COVID-19 patients are located more than 100 miles from Navajo Nation IHS clinics so that patients in need of emergency care must be air lifted, or transported, off-reservation to metropolitan cities such as Flagstaff and Phoenix, Ariz., or Gallup and Albuquerque, N.M.

The Navajo Tribal government has taken measures of their own and virtually started from the ground up in order to stop community spread of COVID-19. On March 7, 2020, a Nava-

jo Times article traced one outbreak to a rally at the Chilchinbeto Church of the Nazarene where members of my maternal family regularly attended church services. People who participated in that rally also came from nearby towns, such as Navajo Mountain and Kayenta, and some of those individuals tested positive for the virus in the weeks following the meeting.

Navajo officials tried to contain that outbreak by isolating communities through curfews and checkpoints. The Arizona National Guard and the state's Division of Emergency Management deemed it necessary to load Black Hawk helicopters with PPE and fly them to Kayenta, truck more supplies to Chinle, and set up a field hospital at a school gymnasium.

Since March 20, 2020, there has been a Public Health Emergency Order in effect, and issued by the Navajo Department of Health, which strictly limits all individuals from leaving their place of residence only to perform 'essential activities' with a curfew implemented



across the Navajo Nation from 8 p.m. - 5 a.m. seven days a week. Additionally, the same office implemented a 57-hour weekend curfew from 8 p.m. Friday to 5 a.m. Monday for most of the month of May, so far. Weekend curfew violators face police arrest, 30 days in jail, or fines up to \$1,000.

Since April 17, 2020, all individuals two years of age and older are required to wear masks while in public and to avoid close contact with others by social distancing six feet from others. Even though some states are beginning to reopen, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez reports that his administration is listening to their health experts, including the data and facts, and will not reopen until a consistent

downward trend in the number of new COVID-19 cases is observed.

At the beginning of May, tribal governments had yet to receive any of the \$8 billion in CARES Act money Congress authorized on March 27. The Navajo Nation, Gila River Indian Community and the Ak-Chin Indian Community joined a lawsuit to force the release of funding. But on May 11, 2020, according to the Washington Post, the Navajo Nation received \$600 million 10 days after it was promised and more than a month after President Trump signed the relief package into law on March 30. Many Navajo's believe that the delay has cost lives and can be added to the long list of injustices Indians have suffered at the hands of the

US government.

Others are making plans to use the funds in order to prepare for the next pandemic so that it does not devastate the Navajo Nation in the future. In my personal experience with COVID-19, I still cannot help but look to the history of the Navajo people and their stories of survival, resistance, and bravery. And because my ancestors shed blood generations ago, I can still return to the land and draw spiritual strength from Naatsis'áán, or 'head of mother earth,' in memory of those who have passed.

Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds is a PhD candidate at Middlesex University London, England and she was an instructor at the University of Oklahoma from 2007-2018.

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of tribes, which was submitted by tribes under federal penalty for misrepresentation so you would expect them to be accurate, then Treasury would have had a solid case here," Kalt said. "But for reasons no one knows, Treasury did not turn to any of the data the tribes all submitted in April."

In the housing department's information, some tribes were over-counted, and some were under-counted, he noted. And some tribes were shown as having a population of zero, because they had never participated in a certain housing program.

"To give you an example, I had a tribe call me today, 'Joe, the HUD data says we have 170 or 80 people. We have 1,083 people,'" Kalt said.

"If you look at the appendix, you can see how much it is all over the place."

Bryan Newland, Anishinaabe, is tribal chairperson for the Bay Mills Indian Community on the shores of Lake Superior. He said if tribes knew federal housing numbers were going to be used to determine allocation of relief funds, they would have checked to make sure they were accurate. "But we weren't given that opportunity," Newland said.

The Bay Mills tribe received \$2.1 million, which Newland said is far short of what's needed to get everyone safely back to work.

"You really have to think about things in all of your operations that

could be vectors for disease. And so that includes ventilation systems, everything down to door handles and what kind of doors you have, the proximity of people in your offices," he said. "You're going to want to ... really reduce the amount of physical contact and interpersonal contact that people have. And that all costs money. And as well as getting PPE for health workers and testing equipment."

Newland said the shortage of funds is "really gonna hurt our ability to make investments in our buildings and work spaces in a way that keeps people safe."

That's not the worst of it, though, he said.

"The most frustrating part is that, you know,

tribes worked really hard across the country with Democrats and Republicans in Congress to get that money appropriated," he said. "And the Treasury Department wasted no time in getting money out to states and local governments. And for some reason, tribes are still waiting for Treasury to follow the law. And it's just yet another episode in the long line of mistreatment of tribes."

"And you would think by 2020, we would be beyond this. But it's very frustrating to see that the government continues to treat Indian Country this way."

Joaqlin Estus is a national correspondent for Indian Country Today, and a longtime Alaska journalist.

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al Guard, under order of Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt and in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Oklahoma State Department of Health, Oklahoma State University laboratories, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, visited with experts at especially affected locations within Guymon. Beginning at the Memorial Hospital of Texas County, which has been seeing an average of three to four COVID-19 patients a day, and then moving on to the Texas County Health Department and the Seaboard Foods pork processing plant, the group focused on creating solutions to issues such as facility layouts, and supply, resources, and staffing shortages.

"You all are on the frontlines of the fight, and this is where the most asymmetrical risk is," said Oklahoma Army National Guard Brig. Gen. Thomas Mancino, the commander of the Oklahoma Governor's Task Force, to Guymon health-

care workers. "We could be at the beginning of a surge that overwhelms the system and capacity here, more than likely requiring a regional response instead of just a state response."

"The Guard has probably doubled my staff here in Guymon," said Salisbury. "I really appreciate the National Guard coming out and being so willing. Most people don't come to Guymon, Oklahoma, and they've all been great. They've stayed and worked through the weekends and everything else. So I'm very, very thankful for them."

Though the exact future of the pandemic in Guymon is unknown, the Oklahoma National Guard, along with other helping agencies, will continue to fight the spread of COVID-19 in Guymon and throughout the State.

"I'm hoping to flatten the curve within the next two weeks," said Salisbury. "I don't know that it will be possible, but I have high hopes that we can."

Clinton Service Unit & the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes Present

TELEPHONE TOWN HALL

FRIDAY

June 5th

1:00 - 2:00 PM


TOWN HALL MEETING

Call-in and join us for updates on the Service Unit. Q&A session will be available, contact 405-421-3752 to submit any questions or information.

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Congratulations To All The 2020 Head Start Graduates

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Evelyn Grothe	Omari Love
Rhyker Green	Jaden (Brett) Blackowl
Kingslee Lafountain	Jaxon Campbell
Isabella Bates	Harper Campbell
	Jose DeLeon
CLINTON:	McKenzee Hawk
Richard Herrera	Devlin Hutcherson
Nizhalya French	Kurt Blackwolf-Howell
Xayla Dick	Bryce Chee
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Truman Lampkin	Tewa Keesie
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