

National Minority Health Month
WEEKLY OPED BY EXPLORERS HS INTERNS
INDIGENOUS AND ALASKAN NATIVE MENTAL HEALTH
BY T.N. AND R.H.

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Access to mental health is a crucial aspect of healthcare, as it affects not only an individual's emotional well-being but also their physical health, stress management, and overall quality of life. Unfortunately, the availability of mental health care remains limited, and it is often perceived as a "privilege" rather than a fundamental human right. In particular, individuals who are wealthy or do not identify as people of color (POC) tend to have more access to mental health care than those who do not belong to these groups. This is especially true for marginalized communities such as Alaskan natives and Indigenous peoples, where mental health issues are stigmatized and considered taboo, leading to a lack of discussion and limited access to care. In addition, untreated mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and even suicide can devastate individuals and communities. However, there are ways to address this issue, such as increased funding and affordability, raising awareness, and reducing stigma. Thus, it is vital not only to discuss mental health care but also to work towards expanding its reach to groups that have traditionally been excluded from its benefits.

In the United States, healthcare is required for Alaska native communities. Unfortunately, it is often highly underfunded by the government, leading to limited and substandard care for individuals in this community. As a result of the care available to patients and the standard of care they receive, disorders that fall under the categories of mental health and psychological disorders become a less recognized area of health within this group. The main problems with this situation are the treatment available for patients and the disorders that could be completely preventable with the proper care available. For example, when compared to the population of the United States as a whole, it was found that "post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), violence, suicide, and substance use have been identified as some of the more prevalent mental health issues among AI/ANs" (Kwon SC, Saadabadi A.). So to help solve this problem of inadequate health care in the Alaskan Native communities, three solutions can work together to provide the care that is deserved and available to most of the U.S. already.

Based on data from the CDC, it has been found that approximately 26.4% of Native Americans lack health insurance, including coverage for mental health care. In light of this, a viable solution would involve expanding access to and raising awareness about Medicare and Medicaid plans. This would enable individuals to obtain basic healthcare essentials, such as dental and medical services. Furthermore, enhancing Medicare and Medicaid access to mental health care would be advantageous, particularly for marginalized groups like Native Americans. Such an initiative would provide these individuals with regular health care services and access to mental health care, which would otherwise be unaffordable to them. In addition, this would potentially increase the number of Indigenous Americans seeking mental health care who were previously unable to access services regarding mental health.

The source of most problems in the healthcare system is the overall funding that is available in the system. Most funding is received from the United States government, so the health system tends to break when that funding is diminished. In some dismissed groups, like the Native American group, health care requires increased funding. In an analysis done by the National Congress of American Indians, "to match the level of care provided to federal prisoners, funding would have to double nearly." Considering this, a viable solution or starting point to solving this healthcare disparity resulting in significant mental health disorders with inadequate care would be increasing and balancing federal funding in health care across the U.S., but most importantly for Alaskan native groups. With an increased federal budget, the problems begin to diminish for those with mental health disorders in the community who can gain and use health care that helps prevent and treat mental health disorders.

Another way to improve the accessibility of mental healthcare is by increasing the representation of indigenous individuals in mental health care and the field of medicine. Having more Native Americans in healthcare can help overcome cultural barriers and biases that prevent Indigenous peoples from seeking mental healthcare. Healthcare providers who understand Indigenous cultural values, traditions, and beliefs may be better equipped to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate mental health services, which could lead to better outcomes for Native

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American patients. Additionally, Native American healthcare providers can use their knowledge to advocate for policies and programs promoting mental healthcare access and reducing disparities in care, thereby addressing systemic issues contributing to poor mental healthcare access for Indigenous peoples. The health care system seems to be an agreed-upon state of being broken, especially in marginalized communities. As a result, patients are improperly treated or not treated at all. One of the biggest problems is the mistreatment of mental health disorders. These solutions and ideas were brought up having increased federal funding. They used that to bring in more mental health professionals, expand access, and raise awareness of Medicaid plans. As a whole, these ideas can work together to address the significant issues that have been recognized in the Alaskan Native Communities. In time and with work put in and the essential areas recognized, the disparities in these communities can be changed for the better and provide adequate health care to all Alaskan natives, both physically and mentally.

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EVENTS THIS WEEK

Speaker Dr. Socia Love Thurman from the Seattle Indian Health Board:

A TRADITIONAL HEALTH

APPROACH IN URBAN INDIAN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

Wednesdays

12:00PM

Brave Space Discussions: continuation of speaker's themes

Thursdays

12:00PM

Prize from Emails

Announced every Friday

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