GROWING THE SEEDS OF NATIVE AMERICAN HEALTH

FERTILE GROUND II

Growing the Seeds of Native American Health

FINAL REPORT
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FINAL REPORT

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In the summer of 2015, the American Heart Association (AHA) and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) began a partnership focused on improving the health of Indigenous Americans. The SMSC had recently launched its Seeds of Native Health campaign to improve Native nutrition and the AHA had commissioned Feeding Ourselves, a groundbreaking report on food access and health disparities within Native communities. We joined together in pursuit of the common goal to develop new ways to advance and expand grassroots nutritional health efforts already underway in Indian Country.

Our partnership led to our co-organizing “Fertile Ground: Planting the Seeds for Native American Nutrition and Health” in Minneapolis on October 15, 2015. This funders’ roundtable was the first-ever national gathering of philanthropic organizations held to specifically discuss the needs and investment opportunities in Native dietary health, food access, and food systems.

The interest among participants of that first gathering was so great that we immediately began planning a second conference. “Fertile Ground II: Growing the Seeds for Native American Health,” held in May 2016, focused on advocacy and policy change to improve health and nutrition within Native communities. We are grateful to the nearly 200 Native leaders, Native youth advocates, public health experts, members of the philanthropic community, and others who gathered together to share ideas, case studies, and strategies.

Throughout the conference, we were energized by the wonderful examples of on-the-ground work being implemented by tribal leaders and community activists. We were especially inspired by the Native youth leaders who shared their innovative visions for a healthier future.

This report summarizes the key discussions and learnings at Fertile Ground II. We hope it serves as a valuable reference in future conversations and as a
roadmap for new partnerships and investments. We sincerely thank the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for its generous funding which has made this report possible.

 Powerful, strategic and practical dialogue over three days resulted in major ideas and actionable strategies being identified and developed. Participants exchanged ideas in the areas of:

- Addressing poverty and empowering tribal economies to improve health outcomes
- Increasing access to healthy, affordable and traditional foods
- Increasing access to physical activity and active community places
- Empowering healthy environments in early child care
- Empowering healthy environments in schools
- Utilizing culture as prevention and a pathway towards holistic community health
- Empowering youth leadership and action

We were pleased to announce during Fertile Ground II the creation of a Policy Innovation Fund, which will provide the resources for Native-led policy change efforts in the areas of advocacy, implementation and evaluation. We are in the planning stages to create a coalition to fund this initiative, and we welcome your ideas and financial support to help move this important effort forward.

Effective advocacy requires collaboration, and we urge you to challenge yourself and your organization to do more to support Native-led policy change in whatever ways are possible. Truly, a grave food and health crisis exists across Indian Country. Without dramatic and sustained investments in changing the underlying causes of health disparities, the future well-being of Native peoples and tribal nations is in jeopardy.

Thank you for heeding this call and agreeing to be a part of this journey. We are eager to raise up the voices and priorities of Indian Country, and we look forward to your continued interest and engagement as we work together to improve Native Americans’ health.

Sincerely,

Charles R. Vig
Chairman
Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

Nancy Brown
Chief Executive Officer
American Heart Association
This profound insight succinctly states the impetus for the “Fertile Ground II: Growing the Seeds for Native American Health” convening. The health of individuals, families and communities all starts and ends with food.

In May 2016, the “Fertile Ground II: Growing the Seeds for Native American Health” convening provided a unique opportunity for all who are concerned about Native children and families’ health to work together towards solutions.

The Native American epidemic of preventable, diet-related diseases is directly attributable to poverty; a lack of access to and control of resources; a dearth of fresh, healthy foods; inadequate nutrition education; mostly non-existent infrastructure for physical activity; and a lack of programs for infants, children and youth. Most important, there is a lack of focus and understanding of the critical central role of Native cultures and empowered, community-based control to achieving success.

Over two and a half days, Native American leaders, Native youth advocates, and national philanthropic organizations came together through facilitated plenary panel discussions, a showcase of successful community programs, and seven small work groups. The work groups developed 35 Bold Ideas for Action, 21 Capacity Building Resources Needed, and 7 Next Steps, each of which offers a possible point of intervention for advancing this movement to improve the health of Native peoples.

This report, which was supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, presents a strategic framework for diverse
engagement and investment that can build on new and existing proven models, develop community and tribal government capacity to instigate tribal and federal policy changes, and begin to address the root causes of the state of Native American health.

This Fertile Ground II report is meant to serve as a guidebook to identify – in the words of the Native community members themselves – “helpful strategies in the process of creating a new reality for Native food, diets and health.”

Native advocates, tribal leaders, nonprofits, non-Native allies, and funders may use this report to determine points of common ground and partnership. Our hope is to raise awareness and to inspire action and interaction.

Fertile Ground II participants came together to dream big. Key resounding themes include:

- Change led by Native communities, based in their realities and steeped in Native cultures.
- Increased capacity of tribal advocates and the on-the-ground movers and shakers in tribal communities.
- Better understanding and more flexibility on the part of philanthropy and funders to work in partnership with Native communities – investment, not charity.
- Support for tribal sovereignty and tribal policy change affecting the ability of tribes to improve the health of their citizens.
- Investment in community-based programs and models that are making a difference.
- Creative ways to widely share information with tribal leaders, Native communities, federal agencies and funders about progressive models, tribal policies and legislative priorities and opportunities.

- Support for the implementation and evaluation of the effectiveness of tribal and federal policies that work. Building this evidence base is critical to educating funders, tribal leaders and policymakers about the types of Native-led change and policies that are going to truly impact the health of Native children and communities.
- Inclusion of and support for the leadership development and involvement of Native youth who are critical as we work toward a new future.
- Expanded partnerships beyond the “usual suspects” – reaching out to funders, friends and allies new to this movement, to help them develop an understanding of the cultural and historical context for the current environment in Indian Country and what they can do to help.

This report is structured to:

- Provide the background of Fertile Ground II as one of many recent developments that has propelled the movement forward and into the mainstream.
- Share the stories of Native-led, community-based change.
- Present the voices of plenary participants.
- Explore recommendations from seven small work groups for Native-led advocacy and policy changes.
- Provide insight from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation’s largest philanthropy dedicated solely to health.
- Summarize the expanded impact of Fertile Ground II through social media.
- Propel the movement forward, particularly with the launch of the Policy Innovation Fund.

Throughout, we have shared quotes from conference attendees so that they may speak for themselves.
Participating Native youth in particular offered their unique perspective as well as their vision of a future in which they and their children enjoy good health and celebrate their culture in hopeful communities. The young people inspired everyone present with their positive energy and forthright sharing of ideas.

We invite all, Native and non-Native, to journey with us as we explore how best to impact the health and well-being of Native communities.

If there is one thing we have learned during Fertile Ground II, it is that there is an increasing momentum and desire to ensure that the seeds planted here receive the water, sunlight, and care they deserve. This is an exciting time for Indian Country and our friends and allies.
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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT
Fertile Ground II represented an important move forward in addressing the food, diet, and health-related issues plaguing Native American communities that have resulted in dismal health statistics for Native individuals at all ages. Building on the preceding event in fall 2015, focused specifically on funder engagement, Fertile Ground II focused substantively on many years’ of critical work by Native activists at the local, tribal, regional and national levels who called for developing models of Native-led programming; policy and systemic change at the tribal and federal levels; and innovative partnerships.

Fertile Ground II presented a powerful platform and safe space to gather diverse players – Native community stakeholders, Native and non-Native philanthropic representatives, public health experts, federal agencies, researchers, and academics – to come together to begin solving one of the greatest challenges and contradictions of our time:

*Why has a people with an extraordinarily large land base, cultural tradition that values community engagement and personal health, heritage of self-sufficiency, and history of effective self-governance come to find themselves with inarguably the poorest health, diminished life expectancy, crippled economy, inadequate access to healthy foods, and minimized control over their land and other critical assets?*

The answers are complex. The most profound reason is due to the colonization and forced removal of Native peoples from their lands and more than 200 years of U.S. government policies and practices that deliberately worked to destroy traditional Native cultural and spiritual lifeways and erode the sovereign rights of American Indian tribes. These policies have directly contributed to tremendous socioeconomic and health disparities. They also help explain why Natives, despite their land base and agricultural traditions, still struggle today to feed their people and create thriving food systems and healthier communities. While much work has been done by Native leaders and activists since the 1960s to address those injustices, strengthen tribal sovereignty, and revitalize Native cultures, food systems, and health, true success will likely take significant resources and a long-term, multi-generational commitment from tribes and their partners.

The solutions will require innovative partnerships, resources, creativity, systemic policy change, issue
prioritization, community engagement, and youth leadership.

The Fertile Ground I and II convenings were the result of the partnership between the American Heart Association (AHA) and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) to accelerate the development of a national framework to improve Native American nutrition and health.

As convening partners, the AHA and SMSC are committed to creating a broad-based coalition of funders and stakeholders which will address Native American food access and nutritional health problems.

SMSC formalized its food systems work in March 2015 with the launch of Seeds of Native Health (SeedsOfNativeHealth.org), a national philanthropic campaign to improve Native American nutrition. Through this campaign, the tribe has brought together top health, education and research experts, as well as philanthropists, in an effort to develop permanent solutions to address Native dietary health.

Complementing Seeds of Native Health was the July 2015 publication of Feeding Ourselves: Food Access, Health Disparities, and the Pathways to Healthy Native American Communities. This groundbreaking report issued a call to action to begin to understand the complex historical and contemporary challenges to Native American healthy food access, childhood obesity and health disparities, as well as the comprehensive policy and systems change that will be required at the tribal, state, regional and federal levels to shift the paradigm to resource Native-led change.

Feeding Ourselves* was commissioned by AHA and its Voices for Healthy Kids® initiative, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and AHA (VoicesForHealthyKids.org).

Looking first at the historical context of colonization, the treatment of Native Americans as sovereign tribal nations, and the evolution of federal Indian policy, Feeding Ourselves framed the work ahead to engage and assist Native communities in moving beyond this condition. The report showcased the innovative, Native-led efforts in motion on the ground at the community level, as well as at the tribal and federal policy levels.

Along with a parallel context of the evolution of Native American food systems and their resulting impact on the diet and health of Native Americans today, Feeding Ourselves mapped the landscape of needed policy changes at the tribal and federal levels, and encouraged philanthropy to recognize the opportunity to make a significant impact on Native communities in partnership with those communities. Please see the appendix for a summary of Feeding Ourselves’ recommendations.

Feeding Ourselves has proven to be a seminal document. It gave impetus to the SMSC and AHA organizing the “Fertile Ground I: Planting the Seeds for Native American Nutrition and Health” convening in Minneapolis in October 2015. Fertile Ground I’s most important outcome was a mandate to deal with the policy problems and needs of Indian Country. (Please see the appendix for a summary of Fertile Ground I.)

* Authors: Crystal Echo Hawk, Echo Hawk Consulting, Janie Simms Hipp, Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative and Wilson Pipestem, Pipestem Law; Feeding Ourselves: Food Access, Health Disparities, and the Pathways to Healthy Native American Communities, American Heart Association, July 2015 (http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@adv/documents/downloadable/ucm_475566.pdf)
It became clear that another convening was needed to gather advocates, policymakers and funders to explore policy solutions and develop a common social and cultural framework for addressing the dietary and well-being needs of Native peoples. As a result, the AHA and SMSC organized Fertile Ground II on May 2-4, 2016, to exchange ideas and examine what policy change should look like in Native communities; how to support Native-led efforts with technical assistance, training, and other resources; and what best practices exist for addressing challenges and barriers.

This present report highlights the voices, perspectives and recommendations from a diverse group of Native American activists, nonprofit organization professionals, practitioners, public health experts, policy analysts, philanthropists, and Native youth who share their wisdom and vision for the future of a healthy Native America.
“Much of our work is focused on how disparities affect the prevalence of heart disease, which impacts Native Americans at a disproportionately high rate. The good news is that together, we can find ways to improve health through partnership and collaboration. Our partnership with the SMSC on the Fertile Ground convenings are an important part of that process.”

--Dr. Eduardo Sanchez, Chief Medical Officer for Prevention and Chief of the Center for Health Metrics and Evaluation for the American Heart Association

“We are excited to have you all here as we plan new ways to improve nutrition and change health trends across Indian Country. We are eager to continue the conversation and to talk about the problems, but also the solutions – including policy changes in our communities. The future well-being of Native people and tribal nations is at stake.”

--Chairman Charles R. Vig, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community
On the second day of Fertile Ground II, five representatives of Native organizations and communities shared inspiring stories of their systemic work to transform Native health. In this visual journey, they took participants through their "PechaKucha" presentations (showing 20 images for 20 seconds each) that illustrated powerful examples of the diversity and innovation in Indian Country.

The presenters shared how they are working toward advocacy and policy change unique to their communities. Just as each Native community’s history, traditions, assets and circumstances are different, the strategies of each of organization featured varied. However, they each strive to improve the health outcomes of Native children, families and communities.

The voices of these grassroots change-makers are too rarely heard by mainstream America, but their programs are evidence of how one organization or person can transform a community through culture, healthy foods, tribal laws, and access to credit, resulting in Native children and families finding a path toward improved health.

Among the many vibrant initiatives flourishing in Native communities, these models showcased some of the programs that are making a difference.

- The American Indian Center of Chicago (AIC) has a dedicated wellness program that focuses on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of community members. The holistic approach to health considers the environment and includes programs such as the Medicinal Garden, Senior Lunches, and Social Services (offering food and clothing). Last year, the garden produced sage, sweet grass and tobacco, which were used in ceremonies at AIC. AIC works with local Native children and schools through gardening projects to promote access to healthy foods.
Dakota Wicohan works to revitalize the Minnesota Dakota language. Its mission is “to revitalize Dakota as a living language, and through it, transmit Dakota lifeways to future generations.” Programs and activities include work with horses, traditional arts, and language as a way to use culture as a prevention strategy for at-risk Dakota youth and families. Dakota Wicohan has also trained more than 600 Native and non-Native educators, professionals and youth in Dakota culture, history and lifeways as a strategy to promote increased understanding and improved relations with non-Native institutions and the mainstream community.

Community Outreach and Patient Empowerment (COPE) partners with the Navajo Nation Community Health Representative Outreach Program to improve the lives of those living with chronic diseases in Navajo communities. Improving health via access to nutritious food is a critical priority for COPE. With Harvard University Law School and other experts, COPE created “Good Laws, Good Food: Putting Food Policy to Work in the Navajo Nation,” a toolkit for other communities. In partnership with Indian Health Service, country stores, and grocery stores, COPE also operates the Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program, which enables doctors to “prescribe” fruits and vegetables to overweight families by giving them certificates for free produce.

LAHOMA SIMMONS, THE MVSKOKE LOAN FUND (OKMULGEE, OKLAHOMA)

• The Muscogee Creek Nation created the Mvskoke Loan Fund (MLF) with the mission to create a sustainable Native Community Development Financial Institution for Muscogee Creek Nation tribal members throughout the State of Oklahoma. The mission of MLF is to foster the entrepreneurial growth and financial well-being of its citizens in two ways: (1) Providing comprehensive, culturally appropriate financial education/asset building, business development training services, and access to capital; and (2) Serving as a permanent, sustainable community development finance resource promoting job and entrepreneurial growth. MLF works with local producers to get goods to market. In light of the looming FDA regulations under the Food Safety and Modernization Act, MLF is working with producers, tribal agriculture businesses, and others to develop its own comprehensive tribal food code.

MARIAH GLADSTONE, NATIVE YOUTH LEADER AND FERTILE GROUND YOUTH LEADERSHIP FELLOW (BLACKFEET, MONTANA)

• Like many Native communities, the Blackfeet Reservation faces high suicide rates, depression, drug abuse, diabetes, nutritional problems, and loss of culture. In communities plagued by these issues, traditional knowledge becomes one of the Blackfeet Nation’s greatest weapons in its fight for wellness and survival. Mariah’s goal is to find ways to address these issues, specifically through fitness and nutrition. She has worked in her tribal community as well as the Indigenous community at Columbia University to improve knowledge of traditional foods.
“The environment is what shapes and forms our culture, so if we can start taking better control and empowering ourselves with our own wellness by eating our [Native] foods, by being active on the land – all of those things – reciprocity happens.”

--Valerie Segrest,
Project Coordinator, Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project

PLENARIES

“SETTING THE TABLE” FOR TRANSFORMATION OF THE HEALTH OF INDIAN COUNTRY THROUGH ADVOCACY, POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

A series of three plenary sessions throughout the convening sought the ideas and perspectives from the best and brightest in Indian Country, as well as allied and influential thought leaders. The broad range of expertise represented by plenary participants was unparalleled. The convening was a singular opportunity to hear from these visionaries on what innovative community change looks like; the breadth of supportive policy change; and what barriers exist, particularly at the federal level, for improving health outcomes and accessing resources.

Facilitated discussions allowed tribal leaders, health care professionals, philanthropists, academics, activists, and policy experts to shed light on:

- The landscape of federal policies and their effect on Native communities and families.
- Innovative grassroots models that are positive proof of Native communities' ability to begin to heal themselves and to showcase what is possible.
- Policy and resource barriers to greater success.

This work is very personal for many of the panelists and attendees, affecting their families, communities and themselves. As Denisa Livingston from the Diné Community Advocacy Alliance noted,

“It is the first time in history people are dying from diabies – diabetes and obesity – and not starvation. Every Navajo family has been affected. One of three of us is diabetic. This is our reality.”

Opening plenary

“FRAMING INTERSECTIONS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATIVE-LED POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE”

The opening plenary focused on how public health policy and systems have contributed to the extraordinarily high rates of chronic diseases in Indian Country – which are literally jeopardizing the future health and well-being of Native peoples and tribal nations. This plenary sought to answer one fundamental question: How can Native-led advocacy and policy change related to food access, physical
activity, the role of Native cultures, and schools, serve as access points for improved health?

The panel included:

- Fawn Sharp, President, Quinault Indian Nation and 1st Vice President, National Congress of American Indians
- Zach Ducheneaux, Board Member, Northwest Area Foundation and Staff Member, Intertribal Agriculture Council
- Kris Rhodes, Executive Director, American Indian Cancer Foundation
- Valerie Segrest, Project Coordinator, Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project

The panelists’ experience and wisdom called for cross-pollination of issues related to health, food systems, and systems change, as the broad spectrum of health issues encountered by Native Americans are symptoms of deeper problems. Uniting constituencies and enforcing guaranteed tribal rights can only benefit Native communities as we begin to pull back from the brink of our health crisis. In their own words:

“We have to change the way we look at culture and tradition. Culture is how we did things: harmonious, sustainable and thoughtful. That is a guide for the system change and paradigm shift we need in Indian Country today.”

“We have tried every other thing in Indian Country to address the health crisis we face except fixing our food system to address the societal ills that befall Indian communities. The solution is so simple; we have to rebuild our food systems.”

“There is a lot of hopelessness within Indian Health Services due to the historic underfunding. We need a Tribal Bill of Health Care Rights.”

--- Zach Ducheneaux, Board Member, Northwest Area Foundation and Staff Member, Intertribal Agriculture Council

The American Indian Cancer Foundation was formed five years ago because our communities were not experiencing the same success of declining cancer rates in the last 10 years as other populations. Native people are one of the only populations whose cancer rates continue to climb.

“We need a framework to bring the community together to take control of our lives because our poor health is a symptom of deeper problems in our communities. We need community involvement in developing health policy. We need our tribal councils to be engaged. We need our Elders and youth to be engaged.”

--- Fawn Sharp, President, Quinault Indian Nation and 1st Vice President, National Congress of American Indians
“We need a Native-led approach and framework to keep us healthy. Our communities are fed up with us working in silos. Those working on community gardens, health clinics, and cancer prevention are all working separately.”

--Kris Rhodes, Executive Director, American Indian Cancer Foundation

“The first and most environmentally sound legislation and health policy examples are the treaties signed by tribes in the Northwest. Culture is our medicine.”

“Addiction, heart disease, diabetes, suicide, and cancer are all symptoms of larger problems.”

“Historical trauma is a wound on the soul of Native communities. Involving our people in solutions is a part of the healing process.”

--Valerie Segrest, Project Coordinator, Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project

On April 1, 2015, the “Healthy Diné Nation Act of 2014” went into effect, with 100% of the revenues designated to fund Community Wellness Projects on the Navajo Nation. This taxation has been a platform to address suffering, disease, sickness, and unhealthy lifestyles all related to food – a tool to start a health revolution in our communities.

Second plenary

“EXEMPLARY EXAMPLES OF HEALTH ADVOCACY AND POLICY CHANGE IN INDIAN COUNTRY”

The second plenary featured five promising models of Native-led health advocacy and pioneering policy change in Indian Country and other arenas. Panelists and their models were:

DENISA LIVINGSTON, COMMUNITY HEALTH ADVOCATE, DİNÉ COMMUNITY ADVOCACY ALLIANCE (DCAA)

DCAA is on the cutting edge nationally of creating and supporting a new Navajo Nation policy to reduce taxes on healthy food sales and increase sales tax on “minimal-to-no nutritional value food items.” Effective April 1, 2015, this “unhealthy foods tax” is the first of its kind in Indian Country and raised $300,000 during the first quarter of implementation. The revenue will support community wellness programs in the 110 Navajo Chapters.

NICK TILSEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (CDC)

As a catalyst to create systemic change, Thunder Valley CDC is working to create systemic change and end poverty on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Thunder Valley does this through a multi-faceted approach that ultimately creates vibrant and healthy communities. They are currently building a 34-acre community and housing development in order to create, “an ecosystem of opportunity through deliberate action and systemic solutions as large and comprehensive as the historic challenges facing our community.”
IEN’s environmental justice-focused mission includes powerful work related to food sovereignty. IEN has created a local learning garden for young Indigenous families, started a commercial kitchen, facilitated farm-to-school programs, supported local food entrepreneurs, and provided space for nutrition education.

IFAI’s Model Food and Agriculture Code Project, has just completed its first of three phases to establish a model legal framework that tribal governments may adopt to regulate and support food and agricultural systems. Code sections may include provisions for food safety, land use, water, sustainability principles, organic production, protection of seeds and traditional foods among other subjects. The project is now conducting a series of roundtable discussions to determine the most pressing needs in Indian Country.

Through seven community gardens, Zuni youth are connected with Zuni traditions, learn about healthy eating and nature, and have fun. Through a partnership with the Zuni Public School District and others, ZYEP has integrated Zuni gardening and nutrition into the public elementary school science curriculum.

We are about nation and health building, which is about exercising our inherent sovereignty over our food.

--- Janie Simms Hipp, Director, University of Arkansas School of Law’s Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative

--- Denisa Livingston, Community Health Advocate, Diné Community Advocate Alliance
“History shows that too often philanthropy is challenged because they have taken power out of the hands of the community and therefore the spirit. We have to build power among our people. Too often outside entities come up with ‘solutions’ that have only perpetuated the problems.”

“The biggest assets we have are the Native communities themselves. They should be the architects of change in our communities. Our people have been there from the beginning. We, in the communities, also have to admit what we don’t know to open spaces for new kinds of partnerships between the communities, philanthropy, and the federal government.”

“I believe 100% that we can end poverty in one generation with new kinds of partnerships that power community-led development.”

“Let’s dream big for what we want for our future. If you can end poverty in the poorest places in the U.S., and set high standards for development with community-led and developed, we can help create models useful for around the world.”

--Nick Tilsen, Executive Director, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation

“We do our best with personal decisions and choices.... Our work is at the intersection of our personal choice, power and responsibility, and systemic and infrastructure change.”

“It took 500 years to get to the place we are in now; it will take more than one grant cycle to solve the problems.”

--Simone Senogles
Food Sovereignty Program Coordinator, Indigenous Environmental Network

“So much to do together that we cannot do alone.”

“Policy has a role in this web, a foundational role we cannot ignore.”

--Janie Simms Hipp
Director, University of Arkansas School of Law’s Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative

“Healthy kids require healthy families living in healthy communities.”

“People are living in communities without a lot of resources. Collaboration is the key to a healthier community. It takes community groups coming together to make meaningful change possible.”

--Valory Wangler M.D., Co-Director, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project
Closing plenary

“WORKING TOWARD THE CREATION OF A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR INDIAN COUNTRY HEALTH ADVOCACY AND POLICY PRIORITIES, ACTION PLANS, AND RESOURCE NEEDS”

The closing plenary featured a discussion about the goals of coordinated strategic action and collaboration; the opportunities and challenges such action faces; and the resources needed in Indian Country for more effective Native-led advocacy for healthy Native communities.

The panelists were:

- Jodi Gillette, Policy Advisor and Government Relations, Sonosky, Chambers, Enderson & Perry LLP and former advisor to President Obama on Native American Affairs
- Judith LeBlanc, National Director, Native Organizers Alliance
- Donald Warne, Chair, Department of Public Health, North Dakota State University
- Mia Hubbard, Vice President of Programs, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
- Jefferson Keel, Lieutenant Governor, Chickasaw Nation

“As an African-American woman representing a Jewish organization working in Indian Country, I call up our common history of genocide, persecution and discrimination as a starting place for shared analysis and perspective. But I do so knowing that non-Natives cannot direct the struggle for Native food security, no matter how well-meaning we are. I am reminded that being an effective ally for Native communities means looking for effective ways to support and stand with Native communities.”

“Youth have the ability to change the narrative in Indian Country.”

--Mia Hubbard, Vice President of Programs, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

“Self-governance [of food programs] by tribes is the wave of the future.”

--Jefferson Keel, Lieutenant Governor, Chickasaw Nation

“It is time to organize our power. We need the right combination of skillful leadership and moccasins on the ground and community that is engaged and empowered to create change.”

“The power we have is in acting together.”

--Judith LeBlanc, National Director, Native Organizers Alliance
“Data is important. Data-driven stories are what move people.”

--Jodi Gillette
Policy Advisor and Government Relations, Sonosky, Chambers, Enderson & Perry LLP and former advisor to President Obama on Native American Affairs

“Food is a powerful lever of change.”

“The health crisis in Indian Country is a humanitarian crisis.”

--Donald Warne, Chair, Department of Public Health, North Dakota State University

“We must reclaim food in order to dramatically change the health and well-being of our community.”

--Wilson Pipestem, Moderator and Founder of Pipestem Law

The closing plenary offered invaluable insights into the opportunities and critical priorities for developing effective and coordinated Native-led advocacy and policy change. In exploring the barriers to building the capacity of tribal and Native-led nonprofit organizations to shift policies, the panel identified fundamental building blocks of successful advocacy in Indian Country, including:

- Ensuring that we prioritize investment in data collection, as well as supporting tribes and Native communities’ efforts to use that data in their advocacy and policy change efforts.
- Empowering tribes to take over the management and strategic direction of federal feeding programs and other programs that impact the health of Native peoples.
- Recognizing and investing in Native communities, so they can build capacity for leadership in policy change and advocacy, develop community-based solutions, and impact state and federal policy changes to reinforce and support Native policy priorities.
- Empowering and including the voices of Native leadership in the formulation of policies at the powerful intersection of food, food production, economic development, and health policy that impacts the well-being of Native peoples.
- Recognizing the public health crisis facing Native Americans as an urgent priority by all stakeholders and policymakers in public health.
- Investing in building bridges, peer-learning and sharing, network-building, and consensus within Indian Country.
- Ensuring that tribes and Native health and food advocates are at the table in the formulation and implementation of federal policy-change priorities to support and reinforce community-driven solutions at the local, state and national levels.
- Seating Native youth at the table in advocacy and policy change efforts and decision-making.
The overarching goals of these facilitated work groups were to: raise awareness; generate dialogue; and build consensus among stakeholders. Our aim was to create an effective space to discuss “big picture” concerns and create a common social and cultural framework for addressing the needs of Native communities.

The desired outcome was the development of a draft strategic action framework that maps key policy priorities, actions, and resource needs for each work group. Implicit in these discussions was how to ensure that a racial/health equity approach is integrated and to identify where opportunities and challenges exist for bridging with similar issues outside of Indian Country.

The seven work group issue areas were purposefully broad in scope and small in size to maximize participation. The facilitators used a variety of methods to generate conversation, including large group brainstorming, small group discussions, and one-on-ones. The time between work group sessions allowed for reflection and continued learning from the plenary panel sessions.

The work group journey began in the initial Fertile Ground II plenary session with a traditional water blessing to call on all to walk in humility and healing given the complicated histories of the constituencies convened.
The work groups’ first session set the vision for the transformational policy shifts in each of the seven issue areas which could be accomplished in the next five years. Each work group captured these goals by creating an ideal newspaper front page published on May 5, 2021.

The next step was mapping the strengths, opportunities, problems and challenges in the field, in policy and in the overall conditions of life. The groups discussed in detail the complex maze through which Indian health and well-being is served, managed and resourced.

The work groups’ final session brought the participants back to the reality that there is a role for everyone – tribal leaders, philanthropy, policy advocates, service providers, and community organizers – in bringing about safe, healthy, productive and thriving Native communities.

The groups were tasked with drafting five Bold Ideas for Action, three Capacity Building Resources Needed, and one Next Step. To create an atmosphere of debate and stir up creativity, large flip charts or Post-It notes were placed on tables for participants to work in small groups to share their ideas. The results were posted on the walls as the full group reconvened.

“We must reclaim food in order to dramatically change the health and well-being of our community.”

--Wilson Pipestem, Moderator and Founder of Pipestem Law
WORK GROUP 1: INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTHY, AFFORDABLE AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

Facilitator: Shelley Means, (Ojibwe/Lakota), Native American Women’s Dialog on Infant Mortality
Note taker: Missty Lechner, American Heart Association

Summary of discussion and bold ideas

The production and consumption of healthy food offers multiple intervention points that can support local Native economies; Native sovereignty, self-governance, and control of tribal lands; the perpetuation of Native cultures; and community development, in addition to the obvious implications for Native diet-related health issues.

Challenges to food production in Native communities abound. They range from the nearly impenetrable maze of Bureau of Indian Affairs regulations around leasing tribal lands; to drought and instability resulting from climate change; to degraded environmental conditions (such as erosion and pollution); to state and federal food policies that do not support tribal realities and tribal control.

Fortunately, Native-specific models already exist that include elements which could be adapted or replicated by other tribes and Native nonprofit organizations.

In addition, some federal food and nutrition programs may be managed by tribal communities themselves.
The programs could be tailored to purchase local foods and foods specific to that tribe’s culture.

**Bold ideas**

1. Convert federal money for food programs to tribally designed and self-governed programs.
2. Encourage tribal leaders and communities to write their own food code and policies.
3. Empower tribes to take control of their own land.
4. Increase food as medicine in our tribal health care systems.
5. Engage community to shift demand for and consumption of healthy foods.
6. Reclaim our Native identity through our food.

**Capacity building needs**

1. Increase access to funding and capital.
2. Develop and identify a communication pipeline for sharing successes and resources.
3. Enhance infrastructure to support food production sustainability.

**Recommended next step**

Share the Fertile Ground II report with our communities, colleagues and allies; and collaborate in actionable ways. Fertile Ground could provide the infrastructure for successful partnerships with other food justice and sovereignty initiatives.

**Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward**

While effecting policy change was the most prominent theme, the discussion continually circled back to Indigenous concepts of health, tradition, sustainability, the common good, affordable, sovereignty, spirit, and culture.

Building a movement around food sovereignty and health will require intentional exploration of these terms. To some, “land” encompasses water and the natural resources it contains, while to others it doesn’t. “Traditional” could mean ancestral, or it could mean a vision of sustainably produced food that is shared within community. “Affordable” could mean “on a budget” or sustainably produced. The Indigenous-centered definition of “healthy” could be different from the western medical definition. One participant said, “Even ‘economic development’ needs to be defined as something for the common good and not capitalistic.”

Another compelling theme of the conversation surrounded shared resources. Seed banks and intertribal teaching and sharing could be helpful to tribes that no longer have the knowledge or genetic material to return to ancestral foods. This turned into a very vibrant conversation about small tribes, tribes with and without resources, and how history has impacted our food access.

**Five Year Goal**

TRIBES PRODUCE OUR OWN FOOD FOR OUR PEOPLE, ON OUR OWN TERMS.
Poverty is the single biggest indicator of the health of any community. Existing assets in Indian Country provide a foundation for a future of sustainable economic development. The assets include:

- Tribal communities – self-governance on an existing land base.
- Tribal governments and their sovereignty, which provides a legal framework, although often contested, for strong local economies.
- Tribal colleges that focus on skills development.
- Tribal business for-profit reinvestment.
- The possibility of power building through diversification of tribal economies.

The most troubling obstacle to developing existing assets is the lack of access to upfront capital. This makes it difficult to create enterprises that strengthen tribal economies and invest in long-term economic development to create socially useful, long-term jobs.

The work group also noted that although a large land base helps protect language, traditional foods, and culture, Native communities will not be able to rise out of poverty without an influx of capital.

The group agreed that tribal economies, aided by the power of their sovereignty, have the ability to transform economic relations in Indian Country and beyond. The discussion reviewed tribal governments’ potential strength and ability to create the conditions for healthier environments by protecting the existing land base and traditional culture and pursuing a holistic approach to a common, collective economy and the environment.

**Bold Ideas**

1. More money, aggregated money, leveraged money, unrestricted money, public and private money in Indian Country.
2. Simplify federal and local food and agricultural procurement rules for tribal and Native producers.
3. Boldly convene partnerships with private corporate funders with the goal to build sustainable economic development and policy change in Indian Country.
5. Develop more higher education programs focused on Native economic development.

Capacity building needs

1. Develop online clearinghouse for resource sharing, metrics, technical assistance, and funding opportunities.
2. Support tribal regulatory authority to create model tribal food policies and codes and establish tribal inspection agencies, leading to increased tribal food production, procurement and jobs creation.
3. Provide opportunities to educate advocates on federal law (e.g., up-to-the-moment information on congressional legislation and the impact on tribal programs).
4. Create a training institute for tribal leadership focused on entrepreneurship and economic development basics as well as community engagement.

Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward

The work group pinpointed the fact that collective wealth in Indian Country could only be built through targeted building of community assets. They agreed that until such an approach is taken, we will be doing nothing more than “just re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.”

Many unanswered questions surfaced in the discussion:

• What role can nonprofits play in developing tribal economies, given the lack of access to loans?

• What kinds of private-public partnerships are needed?

• Why aren’t more grants and investments Indian-directed and unrestricted?

One participant from a corporate philanthropy urged funders to support a convening of “a meeting of the minds and resources.”

One of the policy experts advocated for a social media campaign with Fertile Ground branding to increase public awareness of the relationship between health and poverty, and ideally facilitate alliances with non-Native organizations.

Recommended next step

1. Funders need to build relationships and develop structures to gain a deeper understanding of the traditions and cultures in Indian Country. They also need to prioritize consultations with the “moccasins on the ground” people who live with the problems of declining health and poverty before designing programs and funding.

Five Year Goal

INCREASE AND DIVERSIFY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR THE GOOD OF OUR PEOPLE AND OUR WHOLE COUNTRY.
WORK GROUP 3: INCREASING ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND ACTIVE COMMUNITY PLACES

Facilitator: Jennifer White, American Heart Association
Note taker: Leah Gardner, American Heart Association

Summary of discussion and bold ideas

There are many challenges to getting Native peoples physically active. The lack of infrastructure (such as fitness centers or other recreational spaces, biking or walking paths, or even safe roads for walking due to inadequate lighting or stray dogs) has resulted in “fitness deserts” akin to food deserts. In addition, people may not be informed (or may be misinformed) about the health benefits of physical activity, while tribal councils may not make this issue a community priority.

There are many opportunities to encourage multi-generational, family focused involvement in exercise and wellness activities through school programs, the enthusiasm of children to get their families to try new experiences, traditional outdoor harvesting and hunting practices, and cultural sporting games.

However the group identified the chronic, inequitable distribution of federal and state resources to tribal entities as an existing barrier that could be addressed by building relationships between governmental bodies and tribes, solidified through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and Codes of Federal Regulations (CFRs).
Bold ideas

1. Develop a movement focused on the elimination of fitness deserts.
2. Create bike lanes and sidewalks on all reservation roads.
3. Connect activities that encourage exercise and fitness into existing events (e.g., plan a family walk/run around a community issue or holiday).
4. Inspire an urban Native business that refurbishes old bicycles and distributes them across Indian Country.
5. Overhaul federal regulation of tribal matters (particularly around health) through tribal ownership of process, including MOUs between tribes and federal agencies and CFRs.

Capacity building needs

1. Secure educational resources for increasing awareness of physical activities.
2. Create a national wellness app with physical activity ideas and instructions.
3. Empower a liaison to help tribes overcome barriers to state and federal resources.

Recommended next step

1. Convene a national task force to create and implement strategies with tribal communities that encourage physical activity and provide information about its benefits.

Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward

Education about the importance of physical activity to good health was identified as a key element to success. The strong sense of “community” in Native cultures may be a good leverage point to create locally focused gatherings centered on fitness that could also incorporate a focus on healthy foods. A series of nationally coordinated, locally based events that are endorsed by high-profile Native athletes might help generate increased community awareness and participation.

Native community groups (including nonprofit organizations) may be more effective at tackling this issue than tribal councils. But regardless of who takes the lead, more coordination between tribes and community leaders will be needed, as well as the identification of short-term and long-term goals and resources to fund the work in a sustainable manner.

Five Year Goal

EMPOWER MULTI-GENERATIONAL FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO INCORPORATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES ROOTED IN CULTURE INTO DAILY LIVES.
Summary of discussion and bold ideas

The inclusion of young Native people at Fertile Ground II was one of the most exciting aspects of the entire convening. Their unique perspectives infused the event with enthusiasm and hope. The way they put forth their ideas without apprehension or hesitation based on fear of judgment was truly powerful. The ground rules they set, “one person, one mic” and “have fun,” ensured that each person’s voice would be heard and respected and that conversations centering on heavy topics did not devolve into negativity.

At times, the participants expressed anger over the current state of affairs in some communities, including failing infrastructure; poor communication; misguided funding; weak tribal governments; pessimistic leaders; and competition between tribes instead of needed collaboration.

However, these young people identified promising solutions to health inequities, including mentorship programs, youth leadership development, media, intertribal leadership conferences, policy advocacy and lobbying for positive change, and inviting expert advisors to assist in building youth capacity.

They were energetically optimistic about the potential for these opportunities to make a difference, but recognized the need to address the context of Native communities – lack of federal and state support for improvement initiatives; lack of access to funding; and limited access to land use and availability of natural resources.
**Bold ideas**

1. Utilize social media to spread Indigenous messaging.
2. Incentivize Indigenous foods.
3. Seek allies and funders.
4. Advocate and lobby for Indian Country.
5. Start sustainability programming to achieve food sovereignty.

**Capacity building needs**

1. Build specialized skill sets for youth, offering training in such areas as policy advocacy.
2. Build the foundation that supports youth, ensuring that families and the community support each other.
3. Increase the number of funders investing in Native youth by raising awareness of youth needs and issues.

**Recommended next step**

1. Host a youth advocate convening to establish a strategic plan to achieve our vision, resulting in a business plan to take to our communities and use to influence local, state and national policy.

**Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward**

Two topics provoked strong conversation among the youth leadership group: 1) creating policy to incentivize or limit all foods at Native gatherings to “healthy” foods; and 2) agreeing on the definition of Native “traditional” foods.

Offering fry bread has become a tradition, particularly at powwows, and some food vendors depend economically on these sales. After much debate and some input from visitors to the youth group, it was decided that allowing all vendors to participate in events, but incentivizing healthy vendors with discounted fees, was a better first step than only allowing vendors of “healthy” foods.

With the definition of Native “traditional” foods evolving over time, the group to consider “traditional foods” in a pre-colonization category and a post-colonization category.

The young people also had several other recommendations for moving forward.

If a Fertile Ground III event is hosted, multiple youth in each work group will bring a fresh, young, bold perspective. Youth leaders could be invited to facilitate breakout sessions. Youth input on event and agenda planning, as well as the process of developing summaries of work groups, could offer a vibrant and creative spark.

The “Recommended Next Step” of a youth advocacy convening could be accomplished through youth attendance at a food-focused leadership conference to network, build skills, and seek expert mentorship.

**Five Year Goal**

INDIGENOUS DIABETES RATES DROP DUE TO GROUND-BREAKING INDIGENOUS DIET.
WORK GROUP 5: UTILIZING CULTURE AS PREVENTION AND A PATHWAY TOWARD HOLISTIC COMMUNITY HEALTH

Facilitators: Marcia Warren Edelman (Santa Clara Pueblo/Brazilian)
Note taker: Francesca Martinez, American Heart Association

Summary of discussion and bold ideas

This group identified the revitalization of culture as a critical element in the pathway to health for Native peoples. Culture manifests in Native families and institutions, and affects physical, mental and spiritual health. The loss of cultural teachings that support healthy habits and consumption of healthy foods is compounded by historical trauma and the lack of access to culturally responsive and supportive resources. However, young Native people, information-sharing technology, and innovative Indigenous models represent intervention points to use Native culture as the fulcrum toward improved Native health. Our allies in this effort are private foundations and government funders, service providers, tribal Elders, and Native youth themselves. Shifting the consciousness of health care providers and systems to embrace Native cultures as a strength and empowering Native communities to lead the way will transform how health care resources are allocated and will support Native sovereignty over Native health.

Bold ideas

1. Teach Native history and culture in tribal and non-tribal schools.
2. Foundations should apply an Indigenous reporting framework to measure the success of funded Native programs.
3. Offer traditional food programs and degrees at schools to create American Indian and Alaska Native expertise and leadership.
4. Meaningfully include Native voices in the decision-making process for funding community health.
5. Change the way we diagnose and talk about health in Native communities.
Capacity building needs

1. Build a system to develop youth as change agents/culture of health leaders through funding streams and education systems.
2. Support intergenerational traditional farming and gardening apprenticeships and mentorships.
3. Build the capacity of philanthropy and agencies to understand why and how to partner with funders and support tribal communities.

Recommended next step

1. Develop a single advocacy agenda for all tribal advisory committees to push with their respective federal agencies in order to focus federal agencies on the most productive investments in Native food and health models.

Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward

This group’s spirited and wide-ranging discussions articulated a vision for systemic change, with Native cultures as the springboard. The group called for shifting present-day cultural norms and expectations around Native health, empowering Native service providers to enhance the roles of Elders and youth in creating community change, and increasing the understanding of funders so that Native grantees may report “success” in the context of reflecting tribal cultures.

The conversation around the latter topic provoked a positive discussion about challenges in creating opportunities to increase funding to Native programs and maintaining those partnerships, particularly in light of the need for creating culturally centered ways to measure success in terms of cultural values and paradigms. In the end, the stakeholders identified more common ground than not.

Ultimately, the group agreed on the need to:

- Disseminate the information from the group’s work to those participating so that they may continue sharing information and collaboration.
- Provide another work session in future Fertile Ground conferences to focus on each of the Bold Ideas and the Next Step.

Five Year Goal

UTILIZING CULTURE AS PREVENTION AND A PATHWAY TOWARD HEALTH.
Summary of discussion and bold ideas

From the outset, this group recognized that early child care in Native communities differs from those in mainstream America, in large part because of the lack of organized child care services and in many cases, because of difficulty in accessing the limited number of spots available and due to transportation and geography issues.

While Head Start is a primary provider in many Native communities, the number of children this program is able to serve is finite. Regardless of what type of child care provider exists, a common theme among early childhood development providers is the lack of professional development opportunities for staff, inadequate and aging infrastructure, and transportation.

That said, early childhood is a key point in a child’s growth and development of healthy eating habits that can have a lifelong effect and influence. Parents and providers are obviously key to this process.

Bold ideas

1. Empower communities through data collection and sharing information with the community.
2. Build the power of practitioners (including cooks and nutritionists) to understand and use their authority.
3. Tie education to edibles.
4. Build on and support promising models.
5. Sustain cultural continuity.
Capacity building needs

1. Train and support Native-led data collection.
2. Provide professional development opportunities for practitioners (such as cooks and nutritionists), community members, and stakeholders.
3. Fund organizational support and implementation.

Recommended next step

1. Create a digital repository of existing tools and toolkits created for and by Native communities.
2. Establish a network and plan for ongoing workgroups to build out further from Fertile Ground work.
3. Establish Voices for Healthy Kids cohort groups.

Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward

Nutrition and healthy food access for very young Native children is an area that has not received formal study, so this work group identified the need for formalized data that would then be able to bring attention to this issue and leverage resources.

Five Year Goal

**UTILIZING CULTURE AS PREVENTION AND A PATHWAY TOWARD HEALTH.**

Everyone can obtain a Ph.D. in making positive health decisions.”

– Early child care work group participant
Schools play a special role in Native communities – and have a troubled history. This work group acknowledged the historical trauma caused by the boarding school era, in which cultural genocide and abuses of many types occurred. Today, schools have the potential to be spaces in Native communities where youth are supported holistically: academically, physically, spiritually and culturally.

We have a system that is focused on specific academic achievement rather the whole self of culture.

For schools to only focus on academics as the sole point of measurement misses the opportunity to support healthy lifestyles – through school gardens, gyms, kitchens, playgrounds, cooking classes, and programs, and to connect students to their Native culture through curricula and intergenerational wisdom-sharing by Elders.

Schools are a critical element in striving toward a better quality of life on tribal lands. Connecting students at the elementary and secondary levels to higher education experiences can build confidence and instill the awareness that they can and should graduate high school, achieve a higher degree, and strive toward professional achievement. The Every Student Succeeds Act represents an opportunity to change the education system to establish traditional knowledge of life skills and a healthy way of living. A healthy student body is a prerequisite for any level of success.

WORK GROUP 7: EMPOWERING HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS IN SCHOOLS

Facilitators: Shash Yázhí Charley (Diné), Eagle Evolution
Note taker: Sara Thatcher, Goff Public
This working group identified the following five-year goals:

1. Support youth advocacy movements to support changes in school policy.
2. Incorporate Native voices at the table in policy discussions and philanthropy, with an aim towards increasing the number of Native teachers and increasing non-Native teachers, administrators, and school board members’ understanding of Native community priorities.
3. Expose students – even at a young age – to higher education and the opportunities represented.
4. Creatively engage families through school activities to overcome and address historical and present-day trauma.
5. Recognize schools as centers for the community.

Bold ideas

1. Support youth advocacy movements to support changes in school policy.
2. Incorporate Native voices at the table in policy discussions and philanthropy, with an aim towards increasing the number of Native teachers and increasing non-Native teachers, administrators, and school board members’ understanding of Native community priorities.
3. Expose students – even at a young age – to higher education and the opportunities represented.
4. Creatively engage families through school activities to overcome and address historical and present-day trauma.
5. Recognize schools as centers for the community.

Capacity building needs

1. Increase the awareness of under-resourced communities of funding opportunities and build their capacity to secure needed funds.
2. Support broad, Native-led coalitions that are active at the local, regional and national levels to present collective voices for greater impact.
3. Develop culturally competent curricula that are easily accessible to Native and non-Native schools.

Recommended next step

1. Native communities and philanthropy will develop a road map toward creating a policy agenda encompassing education at in early childhood, primary school, secondary school, and higher education. The coalition will leverage the messaging from the policy agenda in a public relations campaign.

Key considerations, strategies and recommendations to work toward

Harnessing the promise of schools to support students’ holistic betterment will require diverse partnerships with community stakeholders and educators at all levels. Players will need to overcome resistance to change and invest energies over the long term. Technology, traditional teachings, and a focus on workforce development all have roles to play.

Establishing and convening a network that will be empowered to develop the policy agenda mentioned above could change our education system and ensure it is more responsive to supporting Native students’ healthy futures and young Native people’s roles as tomorrow’s leaders.

Five Year Goal

BRIDGING AND SUPPORTING THE SUCCESS OF NATIVE STUDENTS.
SUMMARY: INDIAN COUNTRY ADVOCACY AND POLICY WORK GROUPS

STEPS TOWARD A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK TO INVEST IN AND EMPOWER NATIVE-LED ADVOCACY AND POLICY CHANGE

The Indian Country advocacy and policy work group sessions created a unique mutual learning opportunity for philanthropy, policy advocates, tribal and federal government representatives, and community activists and organizers.

The results reflect a readiness for a new kind of partnership between these communities, premised on the need to shift the focus from simply addressing immediate crises to focusing on long-term solutions that target the roots of the problems through community-driven advocacy.

For example, the Utilizing Culture as Prevention and Pathway Toward Holistic Community Health work group discussed the need to shift the narrative from “intervention” to “prevention” and framing the work of philanthropy as “investment” in Indian Country instead of “charity.”

Common themes and approaches emerged from the work groups which provide a framework for action to close the health disparity gap in Indian Country.

1. **Native culture, beliefs and traditional foods play a central role in community engagement and establishing effective health and well-being policies.** The role of culture was a common thread in the discussions. Model programs have been more impactful when placed within the continuum of Native histories and creation stories, not as an interruption. In the Empowering Youth Leadership and Action work group, a young participant spoke with urgency on the need for inter-generational collaboration in advocacy for the rightful role of tribal traditions and cultures.

2. **Systemic change is needed to match the magnitude of the problems in Indian Country.** Each work group brainstormed problems and obstacles, as well as opportunities and strengths in addressing each of the seven issue areas. Across the board, groups listed more
opportunities and strengths than problems and obstacles. The discussions dug into root causes and solutions. Most groups urged for the creation of a policy road map, a common agenda for advocates and policymakers, as well as accessible resources and clearings for advocacy support, because short-term solutions are becoming obstacles to longer-term gains in health in Native communities.

3. **Tribal sovereignty is a unique legal status that is critical to a culture of health in Indian Country.** A cross section of work groups referenced the critical role that tribal leaders and governments are playing and must continue to play to affect health policy shifts. Work groups touched on the need for tribal governments to have more control over food, land use, and water quality. Focused trainings and support for tribes to take over regulatory and inspection roles in food production were named as steps to fortify the role of tribal governments.

4. **Investments in Native-led projects.** The importance of resourcing Native-led projects was discussed both in the plenary sessions and the work groups. The Poverty and Empowering Tribal Economies to Improve Health Outcomes work group reviewed the historic impact of a lack of access to capital. Native-led projects are an avenue for vibrant, sustainable tribal economies, which build on the social assets of Indian Country. More attention is needed to develop models of tribal economies which are diversified and promote long-term job creation while producing the food and services needed in Native communities to ensure life for next the seven generations.

5. **Native foods are healthy foods.** Native cultures, our way of life, and the spiritual connection to Mother Earth help shape possible solutions to the lack of access to affordable healthy foods. Although only one work group focused on increasing access to healthy, traditional foods, most of the work groups related their issue area to food as the heart of Native culture and the core to sustainable economic development. The Increasing Access to Healthy, Affordable and Traditional Food work group examined the complicated relationship between federal regulations, food programs, and tribal traditional foods – and the negative impact this has on Native communities. There was strong support for establishing tribal food systems that are suited to the legal, cultural and geographical locations of tribal communities. One participant said, “The farm-to-table food process should be the norm, not a privilege.”

6. **Community-driven advocacy.** Organizing the creative energies of grassroots activists in Indian Country through community engagement is critical to eradicating hunger, disease and poverty. Many participants spoke of the importance and power of the most-affected advocating for themselves rather than introducing models imposed from outside of Indian Country. Examples from the Navajo and Lower Brule reservations of volunteer-led movements that successfully advocated for tribal health policy changes highlights the impact of funding for organizing. In the Empower Youth Leadership and Action work group, they advocated for funding a system of technical support in Indian Country that encourages young people to become “change agents” and builds bridges between Native
communities, advocates, and governments for more effective input into policies.

7. **Build the capacity of philanthropy to understand and move strategically in Indian Country.** Work groups discussed a variety of proposals for information-sharing infrastructure – both between tribes and between Indian Country and philanthropy – to share successful model programs or initiatives or lessons learned from failures. Many spoke of the need to develop mechanisms to share “hands-on” experiences and structures for the broad input of the “moccasins on the ground,” which is not necessarily directly related to a specific grant proposal. Philanthropy and advocates alike, acknowledged the reality that “transformational change does not come about in one funding cycle.” More opportunities like Fertile Ground II are needed to navigate the complexity of Indian Country and philanthropy partnerships for long-term transformational change.

8. **The importance of early childhood programs, schools and support for youth leadership development.** Many work groups pinpointed the need to focus on the younger generation through culturally appropriate curricula and by eliminating physical activity deserts and encouraging farming and ranching vocational training. There is also a critical need for early childhood mothering support services as decisive steps towards breaking the cycle of health crisis both on reservations and in urban environments. Youth participants proposed that at future convenings, they be invited to participate across all of the issue discussion groups instead of meeting as a separate track in the overall program.

9. **Need for a nationally coordinated approach to walking the traditional path to healthier Native communities.** The potential for new partnerships and collaborations prompted a call for more nationally coordinated efforts, both inter-tribally and between Native communities and philanthropy. The complex histories, the role of culture, and on-the-ground experiences are the starting points for strategic partnerships.

The proposals for 35 Bold Ideas for Action, 21 Capacity Building Resources needed, and 7 Next Steps create a framework for action on the health and well-being of Indian Country.

“Transformational change does not come about in one funding cycle.”
The complex histories, the role of culture, and on-the-ground experiences are the starting points for strategic partnerships.
A MESSAGE FROM THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

Fertile Ground II participants received a very special surprise on the final day when Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, President and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), sent a personal video message. RWJF has long been an important champion and investor in the health of Indian Country. The organization is also an important partner to AHA through their joint initiative, Voices for Healthy Kids.

Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey shared some important concluding thoughts with participants:

"Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to participate in this important meeting to help improve the health outcomes for Native Americans. I’m sorry I couldn’t join you in person, but this is so crucial I wanted to be sure the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was represented, even if only virtually. We are so very proud to be part of this critical effort, and we want to continue to be a part of the conversation.

So let me start by thanking the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, a tremendous partner to the American Heart Association and the Voices for Healthy Kids, who are working to increase the access to healthy and traditional foods for all Native Americans. And thank you too to the leaders representing their tribal nations who are in attendance as well as the inspiring Native youth, the future leaders of this critical effort.

As some of you may know, the Robert..."
Wood Johnson Foundation is the largest philanthropy in America dedicated solely to health. We co-founded Voices for Healthy Kids, one of the sponsors of this meeting, and our vision is to work alongside others to build a Culture of Health in which everyone has the opportunity to live the healthiest life possible. And when we say everyone, we mean everyone, regardless of where we live, how much money we make, or where we’re from. The health of our country cannot flourish as long as so many continue to face steep and stubborn barriers to well-being. And we can only get there with the kind of comprehensive solutions that you’ve been thinking about here.

We can and will raise the health of everyone to the level that they deserve.

So I implore you to keep thinking big. And don’t leave your bold ideas in this room. Share them with others and continue to challenge one another to increase the education, collaboration, action and investment in Indian Country.

Don’t leave the new relationships you’ve developed here either. Working across organizations, states and tribes is the only way to ensure that all Native Americans have the opportunity to live healthier.

It’s rare to recognize a moment of great change while you are living it.

But this is one of those moments.

If we all come together,

We can and will raise the health of everyone to the level that they deserve.

So thank you for recognizing that now is the time to build a Culture of Health, so our children and our children’s children can live in a nation that values, and nurtures, their well-being.

--Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, President and CEO, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
GROWING THE MOVEMENT: A SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLOSION CALLING FOR NATIVE DIET, FOOD AND HEALTH CHANGE

6.6 MILLION.

That is the number of social media impressions surrounding the Fertile Ground II convening.

For a Native American event focused on an issue not normally in the public eye, this is an incredible achievement.

If that number is any indication of the support for the movement to improve and strengthen Native food, nutrition and health, then Fertile Ground II truly has tapped into a cultural shift.

Fertile Ground II’s coordinated social media strategy harnessed Twitter (with the primary hashtags of #FertileGround and #NativeFood), Thunderclap (for simultaneous and networked postings), and Facebook posts to widely share our key messages, quotes from our speakers, and impactful graphics.

Our social media goals for Fertile Ground II included:

1. Raising awareness about health policy issues in Indian Country among funders, policymakers, tribal leaders, Native organizations and allies.
2. Promoting dialogue and engagement on these issues.
3. Building relationships.
4. Promoting action following Fertile Ground II.

By beginning social media activity several days prior to Fertile Ground II, we were able to generate early
excitement and awareness. Outreach during the event helped to bring our discussions and issues to those who were not able to attend in person, making Fertile Ground II even more successful and helping to build an online presence in support of our goals.

We know that our message went beyond the “usual suspects,” reaching officials at key federal agencies (particularly the U.S. Department of Agriculture), tribal leaders, funders, and (not least) members of the general public whose awareness and support will help keep the momentum of our movement growing.

We sincerely thank friends, event sponsors, allied organizations, and others who live-tweeted, who lent their networks, and whose enthusiasm buoys our spirits.

The response on social media already tells us that we are making progress and it is absolutely essential that we continue to expand this conversation.

Now, the path lies before us to leverage this online support into action, financial support, and political collateral.

Over the years, I’ve spent time working on wellness and food issues, first as a nurse and then within my own tribe, but it was siloed and fragmented at first.

And now the SMSC and I appreciate better that policy in support of health is critical for us and all Natives.

– Lori Watso, Chair, SMSC Seeds of Native Health, closing remarks at Fertile Ground II
Today there is a growing, grassroots movement in Indian Country for improved diets and health, access to good foods, and developing healthy Native communities. Fertile Ground II is just one contribution towards this movement. The goal of the conference was to stimulate a national discussion about food-related, Native-led policy work. It provided a forum for learning, exchanging ideas, brainstorming, identifying problems, and – just as important – cultivating new friends and allies. We allowed the voices of our brightest leaders, including those not often heard from, to come to the forefront.

We were particularly inspired by the contributions of Native young people who honored us with their presence and who give our work meaning. Their ideas captured our imagination, energized the conference, and gave us a hopeful vision of a future in which they and their children enjoy good health.

This movement is larger than any one person, tribe, or organization, and will require each of us – tribal governments, federal agencies, funders, Native nonprofit organizations, researchers, academicians, Native stakeholders, youth, and others to bring to the table what we can.

The Fertile Ground II event garnered 6.6 million social media impressions – absolutely unprecedented for a Native American convening, much less any convening on social issues across the board. People are listening, they are inspired, and they want to be a part of a movement to bring about change and improve the health outcomes and lives of Native children, families,
communities, and tribal nations.

Bringing the issue of Native diet-related health issues and need for change into the collective consciousness is one of the many barriers broken by Fertile Ground II. Increasing awareness and sharing information will play an important part, benefiting all of us who care about Native community food systems and diet-related health issues.

Development of a policy innovation fund for Indian country

The AHA and SMSC have learned through their own respective work in Indian Country – and by listening to Native advocates, youth, tribal leaders, and other stakeholders – that the importance of Native-led efforts to change policies at the tribal, local and federal levels.

As a result, Lori Watso, Chair of the SMSC’s Seeds of Native Health campaign, and Jill Birnbaum, Executive Director of Voices for Healthy Kids and Vice President, State Advocacy & Public Health at American Heart Association, announced at Fertile Ground II that both entities are continuing their partnership beyond the Fertile Ground convenings, and will be working together to create a Policy Innovation Fund for Native-led health, nutrition, and food policy work. This fund will support the strategies and action items like those identified and presented at Fertile Ground II.

The Policy Innovation Fund will be the first-of-its-kind – a dedicated funding stream that will support Native-led advocacy and policy change to improve Native nutrition and health. The intention is to provide the resources for Native-led policy change efforts in three areas: advocacy, implementation and evaluation.

Both organizations have made initial, six-figure commitments toward the establishment of this fund, but intend to expand the pool of resources to support this work.

AHA and SMSC encourage funders and others to join them in financially supporting the Policy Innovation Fund. They have begun the planning necessary to create a coalition to support this initiative. They welcome other prospective funders’ ideas, strategies, and technical knowledge in furtherance of Native policy and advocacy efforts.

Next steps

The collective enthusiasm and successful work at Fertile Ground II has already led to the consideration of several future steps. These may include another Fertile Ground convening on a related topic, regional gatherings, the development of toolkits for community-led policy and advocacy efforts, launching social media campaigns, creating youth advocate development opportunities, and increasing investment by Native and non-Native funders in policy and systems change, whether through the Policy Innovation Fund or other avenues.

The SMSC and AHA plan to continue to listen to partners within Native communities – to tribal government leaders, policy and public health experts, researchers, and those in philanthropy.

The Fertile Ground convenings have demonstrated over the last year that Native leaders and activists are powerful when they work together across diverse constituencies. The time is has never been more opportune to make positive, lasting change for the health of Indian Country.
We are extremely grateful to the Planning Committee members for their devotion, vision and hard work, without which Fertile Ground II would not have happened.

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APPENDIX

Feeding Ourselves: Food Access, Health Disparities, and the Pathways to Healthy Native American Communities recommendations

Fertile Ground I: Planting the Seeds for Native American Nutrition and Health funders’ roundtable summary

Useful resources:

Seeds of Native Health, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community: seedsofnativehealth.org

Voices for Healthy Kids, American Heart Association: voicesforhealthykids.org


Fertile Ground I: Planting the Seeds for Native American Nutrition and Health Funder Roundtable Final Report: seedsofnativehealth.org/fertilegroundreport


2015 Voices for Healthy Kids Progress Report: Transforming Communities, Changing Lives www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/VoicesforHealthyKids/AboutUs/2015-Progress-Report_UCM_477279_Article.jsp#V6Fx0mWh6Pk
SUMMARY

FEEDING OURSELVES: FOOD ACCESS, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AND THE PATHWAYS TO HEALTHY NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

HIGH-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

• Support market-driven solutions to improve both the health of tribal food systems and the health of the people within them.

• Commit resources to ensure planning, land assessment and local leasing regulation processes will allow tribes to control their own destiny for sustainable and healthier food production on those lands within their jurisdiction.

• Increase the amount of healthy foods grown locally and available locally to Native peoples, particularly those who receive benefits from feeding programs, to add value to be retained in the local community when individuals use their feeding program benefits locally.

• Forge pathways – led by tribes, grassroots advocates, nonprofits, and other stakeholders - to create innovative advocacy opportunities to increase Native access to healthy food.

• Study the feasibility of placing management of all feeding programs within USDA Food and Nutrition Service’s (FNS) jurisdiction under direct tribal government jurisdiction. USDA should implement a provision allowing greater use of traditional foods within federal feeding programs and as donated food product in all public institutional settings in Indian Country.

• Catalyze change in Indian Country by providing critical funding for Native communities, tribes and intermediaries.

• Include Native Americans in conversations in philanthropy and public health regarding racial and health equity.

• Understand and embrace the deep and varied levels of underdevelopment, disparities and complex legal and political realities that tribes and Native American people live within.

• Engage in dialogue with funders, policymakers, Native nonprofits, tribes and communities to create working groups with leading Native and non-Native stakeholders to devise action plans.
Building on the Seeds of Native Health campaign and the publication of Feeding Ourselves, Fertile Ground I: Planting the Seeds of Native Health was co-hosted by the AHA and SMSC in October 2015 in Minneapolis. An unprecedented 41 major national, regional and tribal funders, along with federal and state funding agencies, gathered to determine meaningful steps to increase policy efforts related to improved nutrition, greater access to healthy foods, enhanced food sovereignty, and better health outcomes in Indian Country.

A series of interactive plenary sessions, small group roundtables, and a funders’ panel drew the following conclusions on strategies for successful investment in and collaboration with Indian Country:

- The lack of access to capital and credit for American Indian food producers, communities, and tribes and the subsequent underinvestment and underdevelopment of Indian Country are serious and fundamental challenges that must be prioritized and addressed through increased investment, infrastructure development, and policy changes.
- It is imperative to recognize and respect tribal sovereignty and the unique political status, history, and cultural lifeways of tribes and their citizens.
- Culture is prevention. It is critical to recognize that American Indian cultural lifeways, traditions and languages are essential elements of successful strategies to improve the health and well-being of American Indian communities.
- Philanthropy and policymakers need to ensure that American Indian leadership and stakeholders are “at the table” in the development of policies, programs and solutions designed to address food access and health disparities and the root causes that underpin these issues such as poverty and systemic inequities.
• The lack of quality and consistent data regarding American Indians is a serious issue. Increased investment in data collection led by and including American Indian communities is a critical starting point to developing and implementing effective strategies to strengthen American Indian food systems, tribal economies, access to healthy food, and improved nutrition and health.
• Investments in leadership development of American Indian youth must be a priority in all efforts to create community-driven solutions and policy change.
• It is critical to explore the specific needs, similarities and differences in approach that are required to address food access issues and health disparities within reservation and urban American Indian communities. Each population has its own unique challenges and opportunities.
• It is important to support various strategies to ensure that American Indian tribes and communities have direct control and management over key federal feeding programs in order to increase access to traditional, Native/locally sourced, and healthy foods for Native children, families, and those most in need.
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