



STATE OF NEW MEXICO INDIAN AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

May 17, 2021

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New Mexico Indian Affairs Department Partners with Harvard University to Memorialize Tribal Behavioral and Mental Health Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

SANTA FE – The New Mexico Indian Affairs Department (IAD) on Monday announced its continued partnership and recent publication release with Harvard University. Titled "[Overcoming the Distance: New Mexico Tribal Behavioral and Mental Health Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)," the publication seeks to memorialize the Tribal response to behavioral and mental health challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

"We are beyond grateful for the opportunity to have partnered with Professor Henson and the Harvard University Students once again. We will share the publication with our tribal communities and incorporate the findings into our work as we continue efforts to support the mental health crisis response in our Nations, Tribes, and Pueblos," said IAD Cabinet Secretary Lynn Trujillo. "We remain committed to helping New Mexicans navigate through these difficult times and hope to continue our partnership with Harvard University in the future."

The collaboration is a part of Harvard's [Native Americans in the 21st Century: Nation-Building II course](#), a community-based research course that connects current graduate students with Tribal clients to focus on significant issues that Native Nations face in the 21st Century. This year's team consisted of two graduate students: Philip Essienyi, MPH, a Master in Public Policy candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and

Marina Zambrotta, MD, a Medical Education Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The team's research project focused on identifying Indigenous challenges and innovations in delivering behavioral and mental health care during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Through a series of Tribal behavioral health providers in Apache, Navajo, and Pueblo communities, the team looked to take a snapshot of the Tribal responses to these challenges to steer the Department and the state's Tribal behavioral health work. Ultimately, the team found that COVID-19 reinforced that behavioral and mental healthcare requires culturally grounded solutions that are community-based and community-driven, and strong collaborations between Tribal providers, Tribal leadership, and state and federal governments are needed now more than ever.

"Our continued collaboration with the NM Indian Affairs Department is providing valuable educational opportunities for our students, and also allows those in the class to lend insight and assistance to a number of important issues facing the Tribes and Pueblos not only in New Mexico but all across Indian Country," said Eric Henson, Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard University.

"My hope for this report is that it will allow those who are not in healthcare--school administrators, government officials, tribal leaders-- to see the pandemic within the pandemic. The pandemic of behavioral and mental health in Indian Country is one that both preceded and was exacerbated by COVID-19," said Marina Zambrotta, M.D., Harvard University. "I hope that this report will demonstrate that the behavioral and mental health crisis for tribal nations in New Mexico needs to be approached with the same sense of urgency, awareness, coordination, and collaboration as was done with the COVID-19 response."

"COVID-19 has demonstrated the power of Native American innovation in identifying problems and delivering solutions to mental health challenges. It is my hope that this research project will help lift the current momentum within the New Mexico Native American behavioral and mental health community to greater heights," said Phillip Essienyi, MPH, Harvard University.

In observance of Mental Health Awareness Month, the Department will share the publication on the [New Mexico Indian Affairs Department website](#). During the month of May, the Department looks to raise awareness and share resources related to mental and behavioral health for our tribal people and communities.

The New Mexico Indian Affairs would like to send a special thank you to our partner experts Teresa Gomez, MA (Pueblo of Isleta), Jennifer Nañez, MSW, LMSW (Pueblo of Acoma) as well as the Department's Eldred D. Lesansee, MID (Pueblo of Jemez, Zuni).

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