

FLOOR SPEECH
IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES
July 1, 2020

Mr. President. COVID-19 has taken a wrecking ball to our nation's health and economy. No corner of the United States has been spared.

But Mr. President – communities of color are being hit the hardest.

We here in Congress must focus our work on helping these communities.

We must take on the long-standing systemic reasons that these communities entered this crisis at greater risk.

And we must enact real reform. So that the next time – when the next pandemic or economic downturn hits – it's not these same communities that once again bear the brunt of the disaster.

Today, Mr. President, I want to focus our attention on American Indian and Alaska Native communities – communities where infection and mortality rates are much higher than the overall U.S. population. Communities that can't escape the economic hardships this pandemic has caused.

We already knew that pandemics like this take an awful toll on Native communities.

This was true 100 years ago – during the 1918 flu pandemic, when Native Americans died at four times the rate of the rest of the country. This was true a decade ago during the 2009 H1-N1 outbreak when Native Americans died at similarly high rates.

It's unforgivable that the administration was not better prepared.

The underlying reasons that Native peoples – whether living on Tribal lands, urban settings, or elsewhere – are at risk are multifaceted. But, they are all rooted in historic, systemic injustice.

First and foremost – many Native Americans do not have ready access to quality health care, despite the federal government's trust and treaty obligations to provide it. Trust and treaty obligations taken on by this government in exchange for millions of acres of land and countless lives lost.

On the large rural reservations and in remote Alaska Native villages, the nearest healthcare facility might be hours away. And, when you get there – if you can get there – there often aren't enough doctors, nurses, or hospital beds.

These logistical barriers are compounded by the chronic, historic underfunding of the Indian Health Service – which many of us have fought for years to correct. And, while we’ve made progress, the IHS budget still only covers an estimated 16 percent of the need.

And, as a result of centuries of discriminatory land, agricultural, and environmental policies, Native communities also face the highest rates of underlying conditions – like diabetes, heart and lung disease, asthma, and obesity that result in worse COVID-19 outcomes.

Battles over water rights, and underinvestment in Tribal infrastructure, have compounded the problems.

We all know that washing our hands is a critical measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Yet, Tribal communities are 3.7 times more likely to lack complete indoor plumbing than other U.S. households. On the Navajo Nation – which is confronting one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the nation – 18 percent of households don’t have complete indoor plumbing.

And so – again – it’s no surprise that researchers have already found that COVID-19 cases are more likely to occur in Tribal communities with a higher proportion of homes lacking indoor plumbing.

We also know that social distancing is key to preventing spread of the virus. Yet almost one in six Native households are overcrowded – making social distancing not just difficult but physically impossible for many families.

All these institutional barriers combine to create a perfect storm.

These barriers aren’t the result of chance. They’re the result of policy.

It is these institutional barriers that we must acknowledge and finally address – so that, this pandemic is not one more example of the United States’ failure to meet our obligations. This time must be different. We must meet our responsibilities and help build a more just and equitable society.

Throughout this crisis – Native communities have fought back. They are resilient.

For example, in my home state of New Mexico, and in Arizona and Utah-- the Navajo Nation has imposed strict curfews to prevent the spread. They’ve ramped up testing – despite the complete lack of testing supplies in the beginning – and tested about 25 percent of their population, compared to 10 percent nationally.

But Tribal responses to the pandemic have been repeatedly hamstrung by this administration and Congressional inaction.

As Vice Chair of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, I've fought hard for funding targeted for Tribes. When the Administration offered **nothing** for Tribes, we secured over \$10 billion in the CARES Act.

When the Administration fumbled distribution of Tribal funding – missing the statutory deadline for distribution by almost two months – Congress and Tribes pushed back.

Because, Tribes are in crisis. Days matter.

It took a lawsuit and a federal court order for Tribes to get their fair share of the \$8 billion set aside for them under the CARES Act.

And just today, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing on implementation of federal programs to support Tribal COVID-19 prevention, containment, and response efforts.

We heard that policies and practices at FEMA, CDC, HRSA, and any number of other federal agencies have made Tribal access to federal COVID-19 resources harder.

Whether it's denying Tribes access to coronavirus surveillance data – creating a confusing, byzantine bureaucracy for requesting emergency medical supplies – or delaying access to grant funds. This Administration continually makes decisions that disadvantage Native communities. Decisions that threaten Native lives and prolong this country's legacy of systemic injustice.

The Administration must do much better.

And Congress must do much more. Each day we fail to act – to advance policies to address the disparities faced by Indian Country – is a day we fail to uphold our oath of office.

The Republican Senate Majority has delayed far too long.

Infections are on the rise. The U.S. has surpassed every other nation in the world in the spread and death and destruction of this virus. 20 million Americans are out of work, the highest unemployment level since the Great Depression. State, local, and Tribal governments and health care systems across the nation are shuttering essential services and furloughing essential workers.

None of this should come as news to the Republican majority.

Inaction in the face of this disaster is unconscionable.

This body must get down to the business we were elected to do. It's long past time we pass another COVID relief package.

And our next package must include targeted funding and programs for Native communities and Tribes.

We must infuse IHS with additional funding for Tribal healthcare and ensure it has parity in accessing federal programs.

We must provide Tribal governments with the resources they need to keep their communities up and running safely by providing \$20 billion in additional targeted funding within the Treasury's Coronavirus Relief Fund.

The Senate should pass bills I've introduced that have already been adopted by the House of Representatives in its HEROES Act, passed over 6 weeks ago:

- We must make our strategic stockpile available to Tribes. Tribes should be able to access PPE, ventilators, and other necessary medical equipment, just as states can.
- We must make sure that Tribes have equal access to Centers for Disease Control resources to prepare for public health emergencies, like this pandemic.
- Seventy percent of Native Americans live in urban settings. Yet the Medicaid reimbursement rate for Urban Indian health facilities is lower than the federal reimbursement rate at other IHS facilities. We need to balance the scales, and help the 43 Urban Indian health facilities across the nation expand their services.
- And, as so much of our lives move to the internet, we must make sure that Native schools, health care facilities, and government services are not left on the wrong side of the digital divide. All Tribes must have access to high-speed broadband.

Mr. President. This public health and economic crisis has hit us all hard. But we shouldn't deny that some communities have been hit harder. We need to send immediate relief to those communities that have been so severely hurt – including Native communities.

And we need to set our sights on genuinely taking on the systemic and institutional barriers these communities have faced for far too long. We can, we should, we must do better.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.