FIRST PERSON: EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON NATIVE AMERICANS HAVE BEEN SEvere

State-tribal partnerships, assistance programs are essential to addressing the crisis

*The U.S. Census Bureau uses a single category for Native Americans and Alaska Natives. It classifies individuals as Native American/Alaska Native if they have origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachments.

Source: U.S. Census, 2010

by Kansas Rep. Ponka-We Victors

My name is Dr. Ponka-We Victors, and I serve as a representative in the Kansas House of Representatives. I am a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation of Arizona and the Ponca tribe of Oklahoma. Currently, I am the chairwoman of the Kansas Legislature’s Joint Committee on State-Tribal Relations as well as vice chair of the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators.

As we struggle to deal with a world health crisis, I would like to highlight an important issue that is often left out of many conversations: the devastating impact that COVID-19 has had on Native American tribes across this country.

Many tribal leaders have been left to tackle a world health crisis with limited resources, hospital beds and financial support from the federal government. The number of COVID-19 positive cases continues to rise in many tribal communities. Native American nations in the Southwest have seen the highest infection and death rates in the country. From this, various tribes have imposed strict stay-at-home orders, curfews and checkpoints on their reservations to prevent the virus from spreading. Tribal nations have been doing their best to protect their communities, especially elders and children. The elders of each tribe are considered the keepers of the culture and tribal language; therefore, it is crucial that they are protected.

HIGHER RISKS AND DEEPER HEALTH IMPACTS

Native Americans have the highest risk of serious health complications in the country. They are more likely to suffer from diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and other conditions making them more vulnerable to serious or fatal complications from COVID-19. Furthermore, numerous other factors place Native Americans at a higher risk — poverty; multi-generational families living together in one house; and limited access to running water, power and food. These issues have made it nearly impossible for families to take proactive steps to protect their health. Isolation isn’t an option when multiple families reside together, or when it’s more than a 100-mile drive to secure food and water.

The Navajo Nation has been hit the hardest with COVID-19. The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases for the Navajo Nation had reached 9,486 by mid-August. A total of 484 deaths had been reported. There have been numerous issues affecting adequate access to testing kits and timely processing of test results. As a result, infected family members unknowingly spread the virus to other family members.

In May, Doctors Without Borders sent a team of health professionals to the Navajo nation and to the Pueblos to help tackle COVID-19. This organization is equipped with health professionals and resources that they send all over the world to help combat medical crises. The Navajo Nation and Indian Health Service welcomed the organization to help control the outbreak.

States, meanwhile, have responded differently with the various tribes within their borders. Kansas has four tribal nations: the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, the Sac & Fox Tribe of Kansas, and the Kickapoo Tribe of Kansas. Since the health pandemic started, Gov. Laura Kelly has scheduled several conference calls with these tribes’ leaders.

In addition, tribal emergency managers are included on daily calls hosted by the Kansas Division of Emergency Management for local officials. These calls keep tribal emergency managers updated on current issues and incidents across the state and give them an opportunity to communicate with other agencies.

In addition, Kansas Secretary of Health and Environment Dr. Lee Norman has been in communication with the tribes and the Indian Health Services, and a mobile unit with testing kits has been available to different tribes upon request.

JOb LOSSs, OTHER ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS FROM COVID-19

Tribes across the country have felt the economic impact of COVID-19. Indian gaming casinos lost revenue during the coronavirus-related shutdown, depriving some tribes of their primary source of revenue.

Tribally owned businesses and enterprises also lost revenue, and some continued to be closed to help limit the amount of people on the reservation. Unemployment affected not only tribal members, but people from surrounding areas who worked at the tribal casinos, golf courses, hotels, retail stores and other places of employment. As the tribes continue to experience economic hardships and the health crisis continues, revenue from the CARES Act is far from enough to help battle the devastating impact to tribal nations.

STATES CAN HELP TRIBES RESPOND TO PANDEMIC

It is evident that the pandemic has stressed many tribes to a breaking point and created health and economic hardships on the tribes. I believe state leaders should include the various tribes of each state in the discussion when examining the impacts of COVID-19.

The National Caucus of Native American State Legislators has been meeting via Zoom to try and fully understand the issues and concerns regarding the tribes in their state. Recently, the caucus passed a resolution urging all states to support tribal priorities to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and to take active efforts to protect their citizens.

Throughout history, Native Americans have faced challenges, yet have overcome many struggles that were meant to destroy our way of living and well-being. Therefore, I am confident that we will overcome the struggles and obstacles related to the health crisis, but appreciate the sacrifices, help and support from others during this difficult time.

Rep. Ponka-We Victors has been a member of the Kansas House of Representatives since 2011.

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