

# Navajo Youth Leading the Way to Healthier Lives

by: Carissa Brownotter

## SUMMARY

High rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease on the Navajo Nation are largely due to insufficient access to healthy foods and a lack of knowledge around healthy living. The overall goal of the project is to create a youth-led program that equips Navajo youth with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to become leaders in improving the health outcomes in Navajo Nation.



## CHALLENGE

The Navajo Nation, the largest federally recognized tribal nation, faces some of the worst health outcomes in the United States. Spanning across sections of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, more than 75% of households on the reservation experience food insecurity and unreliable access to healthy foods. According to the Indian Health Service, 45,000 Navajo have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and another 75,000 are classified as pre-diabetic. Among Navajo adolescents, one of the leading diet-related chronic diseases is type 2 diabetes. With the development of complications related to the duration of diabetes, youth with early-onset diabetes represent a high-risk population. While many Navajo youth feel they can have a positive impact on the health of their communities, they are not equipped with necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to overcome high rates of diet-related illness.

## YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

You can help inspire youth to become health champions for their communities by volunteering with youth leadership organizations and promoting nutrition education programs in schools and after-school programs.

*"Our people are succumbing to the temptations and dangers of unhealthy eating...I will help change this by educating my people about the impacts of unhealthy eating and what they can do to prevent consumption-based illnesses."*

- NCHO Youth Leader

### Contact

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## SOLUTION

COPE partnered with former Navajo Nation Vice President, Rex Lee Jim, to establish the Navajo Community Health Outreach (NCHO) Youth Leadership Program. To date, the NCHO Program has enrolled 30 Navajo youth across five high schools on the Navajo Nation. Through this program, Navajo youth have increased their knowledge of healthy dietary habits through food literacy and nutrition education that incorporates Navajo tradition and culture. The youth participate in workshops on leadership and experiential learning activities, which are designed to increase the self-efficacy of the youth. While being involved in the program, youth are also expected to lead a service project within their community.

## RESULTS

The community based health initiatives implemented by the NCHO Youth Leaders have had far reaching affects both within and beyond their home communities. Examples of these projects include the establishment of seven community and family gardens, food demonstrations at local schools and chapter houses, and advocating for less junk food in school vending machines. NCHO held their first youth lead Youth Summit in Crownpoint, New Mexico in June 2016. The two-day event attracted over 90 participants from across Navajo Nation, and featured 15 presentations by the Youth Leaders on a variety of health related topics such as gardening, food demonstrations, and leadership.

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS

Navajo elected leaders have endorsed youth programs as an important priority for building strong future leaders. NCHO Youth Leadership Program aspires to sustain and expand its reach by proliferating this model in schools and other community organizations over the next five years. By strengthening formal partnership with local tribal colleges and universities, faith-based organizations, and the Navajo Nation government, we anticipate that NCHO can be sustained for years to come.