

# **PRESS RELEASE: NCUIH Report Finds High Demand for Traditional Food Programming Despite Funding Barrier**

Category: Press Release

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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (October 7, 2024)** – The National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) is proud to announce the publication of its report entitled “Recent Trends in Third Party Billing: Thematic Analysis of Traditional Food Programs at Urban Indian Organizations and Research on Traditional Healing.”

This year’s report highlights the importance of Traditional Food programming at Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) and how UIOs use Traditional Foods to address health disparities and incorporate culture and community in urban American Indian and Alaska Native communities. NCUIH interviewed seven UIOs regarding their Traditional Food programs and the challenges they face in billing Medicaid for related activities. The interviewed UIOs emphasized the importance of incorporating cultural knowledge into their offerings to revive traditional healthy eating and physical activity practices. The Traditional Food programs UIOs highlighted included the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI), community gardens, nutritional counseling, and produce/food prescription programs. Despite these efforts, UIOs expressed a pressing need for increased funding to maintain or expand these services to promote equitable access to food security programs to address the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity and associated diseases in urban American Indian and Alaska Native populations. As found in last year’s report on Traditional Healing, funding continues to be a barrier to building and sustaining programs that include Traditional Food.

## **Background**

This report serves as an update to NCUIH’s previous reporting on recent trends in third-party billing. It specifically serves as a follow-up to last year’s report, [Recent Trends in Third-Party Billing at Urban Indian Organizations: Thematic Analysis of Traditional Healing Programs at Urban Indian Organizations and Meta-Analysis of Health Outcomes](#). In interviews conducted with UIOs for last year’s report, many UIOs specifically highlighted their Traditional Foods programs as crucial to improving the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical health of their urban American Indian and Alaska Native patients, utilizing food as medicine. Based on this information, this year, NCUIH’s research focused on how UIOs integrate Traditional Food programming into their service offerings and the various funding mechanisms UIOs use to support these services.

## **Next Steps**

NCUIH continues to closely monitor how states use Section 1115 demonstration waivers to address health-related social needs (HRSNs) and explore how Medicaid reimbursement can be used as a

mechanism to provide funding for culturally appropriate care, like Traditional Food programming. NCUIH continues to educate policymakers regarding the importance of Traditional Healing for American Indian and Alaska Native people in urban areas and the importance of developing reimbursement models that are culturally sensitive and appropriate.

# ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL FOOD PROGRAMS

Traditional Food programs at **Urban Indian Organizations** help address chronic diseases.

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## Pre-Contact Traditional Foods in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

- ▶ Diets and foods varied by region.
- ▶ Many traditional plant-based foods, i.e., sweet potatoes, squash, beans, corn, and wild rice have low-fat content, low glycemic index, and are rich in proteins, amino acids, antioxidants, and fiber.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Diets were protective against type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity.<sup>2</sup>



## Effects of Colonization *Suppression of tradition, language, culture, and foods*<sup>3</sup>

### Loss of Traditional Foods

- ▶ Historic and current US assimilation policies and other governmental regulations destroy or disrupt access to Traditional Foods.
  - ▶ Residential Boarding Schools<sup>4</sup>
  - ▶ Fish Wars<sup>4</sup>
  - ▶ Bison Slaughter<sup>5</sup>
  - ▶ Failure to protect food gathering rights<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ Forced relocation to reservations in different regions disrupted Traditional Food production and pathways.



### Poverty

- ▶ Potential reliance on government programs for food assistance<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Limited income to acquire healthier foods<sup>14</sup>

### Historical Trauma

- ▶ Stress associated with previous policies that promoted violence and the erasure of American Indian and Alaska Native identities, cultures, and Indigenous knowledge.
- ▶ Physiological stress manifested as serious public health concerns.<sup>15</sup>

### Food Insecurity Among Urban American Indian and Alaska Native Populations

- ▶ Access to Traditional Foods can be expensive.
- ▶ A 2016-2021 national study reported that AI/AN people have the highest food insecurity rate at 23.3%.<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ A study on one urban AI/AN community reported 80% food insecurity.<sup>17</sup>
- ▶ Urban AI/AN people might experience exclusion from Tribal food programs.
- ▶ Disconnect from Tribal community support systems.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ Some Urban Indian Organizations are located in food deserts, areas without easy access to affordable and healthy groceries.<sup>18</sup>

## Government Food Assistance Programs

- ▶ Historically, generally unhealthy non-Traditional Food rations were given to many Tribes.
- ▶ Currently, food commodities revolve around canned and preserved foods.<sup>9</sup>

## Epidemic of Chronic Diseases

- ▶ AI/AN people are disproportionately affected by diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and mental health disorders.<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ Diabetes and heart disease are among the top five leading causes of death for urban AI/AN people.<sup>12</sup>



## Traditional Food Programs *Urban Indian Organizations identified four common programs where Traditional Foods can be incorporated*

- ▶ Structure and operation of these programs vary by Urban Indian Organization
- ▶ Increase social and cultural connection
- ▶ Increase sense of community
- ▶ Address historical trauma
- ▶ Promote intergenerational knowledge on Traditional Foods
- ▶ Improve mental/physical/behavioral health<sup>19</sup>

### Special Diabetes Programs for Indians

- ▶ Helps manage and prevent diabetes
- ▶ Improves hemoglobin A1C, total and LDL cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure<sup>20</sup>

### Nutritional Counseling

- ▶ Can improve quality of life<sup>20</sup>
- ▶ Increases cooking self-efficacy and diet-related self-management<sup>21</sup>
- ▶ Can improve body composition, diet, nutrition knowledge, and physical activity in children and adolescents<sup>22</sup>

### Food Prescriptions

- ▶ Provide patients with fresh produce from health care facilities or vouchers to use in the community
- ▶ Help address food insecurity<sup>23</sup>
- ▶ Improve overall health

### Community Gardens

- ▶ Enhance access to Traditional Foods
- ▶ Increase access and consumption of whole foods
- ▶ Increase physical activity
- ▶ Promote food sovereignty
- ▶ Improve mental health<sup>24</sup>

Read more about Traditional Food programs at UOIs in NCUIH's report, "Research Trends in Third Party Billing, Prevalence Analysis of Traditional Food Programs at Urban Indian Organizations and Research on Traditional Healing." Model based off of Figure 1 in Food Diversity and Indigenous Food Systems to Combat Diet-Related Chronic Diseases. Document Number: Jacob Walker-Sweeney & Kalinda Shetty, A Call-Data Note 2 (2019). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6724482/> (last visited Mar 18, 2024).

For a list of chronic diseases click here: [Traditional Foods Information, Resources](#).

## **About NCUIH**

The National Council of Urban Indian Health is a national representative advocating for the 41 Urban Indian Organizations contracting with the Indian Health Service under the *Indian Health Care Improvement Act*. NCUIH is devoted to the support and development of quality, accessible, and culturally competent health and public health services for American Indian and Alaska Native people living in urban areas.

NCUIH respects and supports Tribal sovereignty and the unique government-to-government relationship between our Tribal Nations and the United States. NCUIH works to support those federal laws, policies, and procedures that respect and uplift Tribal sovereignty and the government-to-government relationship. NCUIH does not support any federal law, policy, or procedure that infringes upon or in any way diminishes Tribal sovereignty or the government-to-government relationship.

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