

School-Based Health Centers

Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes

Situated in the “most unhealthy county in the state of Montana” and confronting staggering indicators of poor health among their people, the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation decided their children deserved better. The tribes made a bold move that is as simple as it is logical: they established and staffed full service health clinics in the schools on their reservation. Financed largely through Medicaid reimbursement, the high quality health care now available to tribal youth includes dental care, mental health services, nutrition counseling, and medical care. The School-Based Health Centers are not only an outstanding example of self-determination but are also a powerful reminder that having healthy citizens is critical for building strong nations.

Unmet Medical Needs

The two million-acre Fort Peck Indian Reservation shares a geography with northeastern Montana and is home to approximately 12,000 citizens of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes. The area has a high poverty rate, and a majority of its American Indian residents are eligible for Medicaid. Over 30% of the community’s high school students drop out without graduating. The unemployment rate on the reservation is over 50%.

The community’s economic conditions have a profound negative effect on reservation residents’ health. In 2012, male tribal members of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes had a life expectancy of 50 years, compared to 75 years for white males in Montana. Women showed a comparable disparity, with a life expectancy 22 years less than that of their non-Indian counterparts. High rates of smoking, alcohol use, exposure to violence, trauma, and suicide prevail among tribal youth. Almost 50% of children in the reservation’s schools are overweight or obese, and more than 60% have had untreated tooth decay. Such statistics led the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to designate Roosevelt County, which overlaps a large portion of the reservation, “the most unhealthy county in Montana.”

Limited access to health care has been one reason for the high prevalence of health problems. The physician-to-person ratio on the reservation is 1-to-4010, significantly lower than the US average. The federal Indian Health Service (IHS) operates a clinic for tribal members on the reservation, but it is short staffed and underfunded. The clinic has such long waiting lists that only the most acute cases are seen, leading one tribal member to quip, “If you aren’t going to die or lose a limb, you won’t get treated.” The nearest off-reservation clinic that provides primary care to low income patients is a two-and-a-half hour drive away. Many children living on the reservation grew up without ever seeing a doctor for routine check-ups.

Clinics in the Schools

The Fort Peck Tribes were concerned that youth were not getting the care they needed to do well in school and develop healthy lifetime habits. In 2007, the tribal Health Promotion/Disease Prevention program adopted the novel approach of setting up health centers in space donated by local public schools. The School-Based Health Centers are now located in 75% of the reservation's school districts. The clinics are open to all students in the schools, whether or not they are tribal citizens, and regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay.

The School-Based Health Centers offer a broad range of services, including evaluation and treatment for common health problems, immunizations, nutrition counseling, sports physicals, reproductive health care, individual and group therapy, and medication management. In 2012, based on its success addressing medical needs, the program expanded to include dental care; students receive preventative services every three months, including cleanings, fluoride rinses, sealants, and dental exams. The School-Based Health Centers employ more than 15 staff members, including a nutritionist, a suicide prevention counselor, dental hygienists, and several nurse practitioners. The providers use evidence-based medical best practices while respecting the local culture and traditions of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes. The program also has three medical consultants – two physicians and a pedodontist —who serve as advisors to the program and help arrange for care that cannot be provided in the school-based clinics, such as restorative dental work.

Funding for the School-Based Health Centers comes primarily from Medicaid reimbursement, supplemented with modest amounts of grant funding, other third-party payments, and an annually renewed IHS P.L. 93-638 contract for community-based medical and dental services, which pays the director's salary. Critically, the contract makes the tribes eligible to bill Medicaid at the same all-inclusive outpatient visit reimbursement rate that IHS receives from the federal government. Although the reimbursement applies only to Medicaid-eligible tribal citizens, the large number of qualified patients generates sufficient funding to cover the additional services that the clinic offers, including coverage for uninsured non-citizens. The contract also provides liability insurance coverage for the tribes' providers. To further use resources efficiently, the program partners with universities and faith-based organizations for specific extra and short-term services, such as nursing student visits, summer medical assistance, and an exercise video featuring traditional dances.

The School-Based Health Centers are transforming the delivery of health care for children living on the Fort Peck Reservation. Operating with an annual budget of approximately \$3 million dollars, they currently provide services to over 1,100 children. In the smallest two reservation school districts, more than 95% of students use the school-based clinics. In a third, larger district

almost 75% of students are enrolled, and the tribes now are working to expand the program into the last and largest school district on the reservation.

Community-Based Health Care

A major accomplishment of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes' School-Based Health Centers is the “de-siloing” of health care—an approach that holds lessons for primary health care everywhere. Their service provision is resolutely student-centered, so that youth have a single point of access for all of their health care needs. Whether a student needs a dental checkup or mental health support, the service is available through the centers. The fact that the medical disciplines are integrated in one location also reinforces the idea that an individual's health is multi-faceted and holistic. Providers coordinate their efforts and support each other, which further contributes to seamless and holistic care. Students and their families come to know and trust the providers in the centers, making it easier for them to ask for help with health issues.

The School-Based Health Centers also serve as a national model for their focus on preventative care. By offering these services in a location that is already part of children's daily lives, the clinics have succeeded in making preventative care readily available to students regardless of their economic status or place of residence. By including health education, the programming helps establish life-long healthy habits, a crucial component of preventable medical care since many of today's major chronic health problems are caused by nutrition and lifestyle choices. Vaccinations and routine medical check-ups minimize the chances that these young patients will eventually develop more serious health issues. In sum, the tribes' school clinic approach turns the dominant health care delivery method—which expects families to take the lead in arranging for services and which is particularly challenging in low-income or remote communities—on its head.

Significantly, the School-Based Health Centers are a cost-effective means of achieving these health-care access and health education goals. IHS continues to manage the on-reservation health clinic, so the School-Based Health Centers complement rather than replace these services. Costs are contained and services are expanded through the strategic use of 638 contracting and Medicaid reimbursement and by avoiding the need to invest in additional health-delivery infrastructure. Looking forward, the clinics also represent an opportunity to build capacity should the Fort Peck Tribes determine, at some point in the future, that they wish to manage additional federal programs. A final benefit is that unlike federal programming, services at Fort Peck's school clinics are designed by tribal citizens and reflect local values and perspectives.

Bringing the Lessons Home

The Fort Peck reservation is geographically remote and the majority of its residents live in poverty, two factors which complicate access to quality medical services. The Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes' School-Based Health Centers make healthcare available to students in a convenient location, so that preventative and routine medical care can be provided regardless of residence or income level. With this initiative, the tribes are building a healthier future for their youth and are developing a model of integrated and accessible care that holds promise for medically underserved communities nationwide.