

A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water

Written by By Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
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PART TWO: The longstanding link between water and health

Nothing comes without water. The tribal housing authority won't build homes if there's no water to plumb them. Schools, health clinics, administrative offices, restaurants, and businesses cannot be constructed or continue to operate without it.

"A homeland for the Navajo people is not merely a piece of land between our four sacred mountains, but is a place where our culture, our language, and our way of life and our people can live and grow," former Navajo Nation president Joe Shirley, Jr. testified to Congress in 2007. "Without water, viable economic and social communities wither and die."

The first U.S. Public Health Service survey of Native American health in 1913 found alarming rates of contagious diseases, linked to the absence of basic sanitary facilities. For decades since, lack of clean water for handwashing and hygiene has correlated to the spread of and deaths from influenza, pneumonia, and some of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the nation, as well as waterborne illnesses like cholera, typhoid, and dysentery.

In the 1950s, when 80% of American Indian and Alaska Native families were still hauling water to drink from ditches, creeks, stock ponds, and other unprotected sources, they were also dying of gastrointestinal diseases at more than four times the rate found in the rest of the U.S. That situation was particularly deadly for infants and the elderly.

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In the early months of the COVID-19 crisis, though 11% of New Mexico's population is Native American, tribal communities reported roughly 60% of the state's COVID-19 cases. A year later, Native Americans accounted for 28% of all deaths in the state, and as of early April, the Navajo Nation's 173,600 residents had weathered 30,182 [cases](#) and 1,259 deaths.

COVID-19's transmission among Navajo communities was propelled in part by the reality that it's impossible to stay home when having water to drink, cook, or clean means driving to a community watering point and filling 50-gallon barrels or going into a border town and purchasing water there every few days. When every ounce poured out counts down to the next trip down rough, dirt roads to haul barrels that weigh up to 400 pounds, water is precious. Running it to wash hands for half a minute feels like an exorbitant use.

Insufficient federal funding has left myriad unmet basic needs, including health care, education, public safety, housing, and rural development, according to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. The Commission found "significant disparities" between funding for Native Americans and other groups in the country.

"Native Americans living on tribal lands do not have access to the same services and programs available to other Americans, even though the government has a binding trust obligation to provide them," the commission reported in 2003.

Again in 2018, the Commission found not only had the federal government failed to address the housing crisis that left 10 times as many Native Americans in homes without adequate plumbing as the national average, the number of Native Americans living in overcrowded houses or without complete kitchens or plumbing had grown by 21%.

On a tour around town, Badonie, wearing a brilliantly patterned wool jacket, strings of turquoise and spiny urchin, and a pale blue mask, pointed out the landmarks that bear witness to decades of uneven progress, in which gains are made only to be lost: The scraped foundations of the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, the former health clinic closed by mold, and the Women, Infant and Children center also shut down when it was deemed unsafe.

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She paused longer to take in the new post office, the new health clinic fronted by a tent for COVID testing, and the new elementary and middle schools that educate children bused in from surrounding communities. She caught up with her son, a special education teacher, on his way back to school after lunch from the new teachers' housing.

Julie Badonie, former president of the Tohatchie Chapter, paused, too, where the road overlooks the cemetery. The field of silk flowers was scattered with American flags, snapping in the breeze, marking the many veterans' graves. Since COVID-19 hit, the cemetery has nearly run out of space.

When the chapter sent requests for funding during New Mexico's legislative session this year, the need to dig more wells or lay pipes to connect to the San Juan lateral was edged out by the need for a new backhoe. The old one quit working, leaving one family to dig a grave by hand.

The chapter also prioritized constructing a warehouse to store that equipment, so maintenance staff don't have to park it in their yards, and improved emergency services. With no fire station in town, when part of the chapterhouse caught fire, staff used fire extinguishers to put out the flames themselves. If Tohatchi residents call for police, it can take hours for officers to arrive from the nearest station. Sometimes, they don't show at all.

Next time Part Three: *Federal funding and oversight gaps left tribes a century behind*

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