

Native American Youth Organize to Impact Health Policy



From left to right: Samantha Carr, Jaron Kie, and Doreen Smith

On the Laguna Reservation outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico, a group of Native American teens have discovered how to use their voices to shift policy that positively impacts their lives. The teens are members of the Youth Advisory Group at the Laguna-Acoma High School Teen Center. The youth group, which began in 2005, is one of three that works with the New Mexico Assembly on School-Based

Health Care. Like most youth organizations, the group has a core membership of teens who are very active and a broader base of students who participate sporadically.

The students meet at lunch or after school in their school-based health care center to plan advocacy and outreach activities that help raise awareness of school-based health care centers. They discuss how to support the New Mexico Assembly's health care policy agenda. They talk about health issues on the reservation and many share their personal experiences, fears, and hopes. They have lost friends to suicide, have dealt with alcoholism and abuse in their families, and have struggled with isolation and personal issues like sexuality, pregnancy, and unemployment.

The Laguna-Acoma High School Teen Center is staffed by nurse practitioners and trained counselors who provide a variety of primary health care and mental health services. It's a place where young people feel welcome and safe, can talk about their problems, and get their health care needs met. In the past year, the center has served as the "headquarters" for teens' training in community organizing and civic engagement.

Through the support of Eski Tenorio, a full-time firefighter and paramedic with the city of Albuquerque who also works as a part-time community organizer for the New Mexico Assembly, the teens have discovered they have a voice that must be heard and have learned how to exercise that voice.

"It's not just adults who have voices. We have voices," says Doreen Smith, an 18-year-old high school senior. "We believe that to confront the challenges our communities face, we need to help people understand what goes on with us day-to-day."

With the goal of empowering young leaders with the information and support they need to actively engage in community organizing and local citizenship, Tenorio teamed up with New Mexico Civic Engagement. This organization facilitates youth-led discussions in which

young people are encouraged to identify issues and concerns and ways to improve their community. They are then partnered with adults to help accomplish their desired changes. Members of the Youth Advisory Group attended a three-day summer institute on the legislative process and took the New Mexico Assembly's *Policy Advocacy 101* course.

Tenorio also reaches out to community organizations, seeking out conferences and health-related venues where teens can present and speak out on their own behalf. Through this outreach, teens have presented their health care needs in front of audiences of medical professionals and community leaders. Additionally, they have met with policymakers in the New Mexico Legislature to advocate for increased support for school-based health care centers as a model of care for adolescents and children, especially in rural communities.

Teen Suicide: A Pressing Issue for Native American Youth

After several group discussions about the pressing health issues facing Native American youth, the Laguna youth group determined that teen suicide was a core policy issue it wanted to address. Every member of the group had been touched by suicide on a personal level. Some had attempted suicide themselves, and now wanted to use their experience to help others. Others in the group had lost a close friend or relative to suicide.

Nationally, suicide among Native American youth ages 14 to 24 is twice that of the general population. In New Mexico, suicide is the second leading cause of death for teenagers and young adults ages 15 to 44 and the third leading cause of death for children between the ages of 10 and 14.

Says 17-year-old Jaron Kie, an active member of the Laguna youth group: "The experts talk about our community in terms of statistics and numbers. They don't realize that these statistics are our friends, cousins, and brothers. They [the experts] don't know that they might have had a brilliant future or who they were before bad things happened to them. They just have them as a statistic."

With guidance from the New Mexico Assembly and New Mexico Civic Engagement, the teens reached out to state legislators in person and by phone. The result was the introduction of House Bill 29. The bill requested \$100,000 to support Native American youth in leading a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program. It received a unanimous "Do Pass" recommendation on January 23, 2007, and was referred to New Mexico's House Appropriations and Finance Committee.

When it became clear that the committee was moving slowly on getting bills approved, Rep. Ray Begay, the bill's sponsor, was able to secure \$50,000 for this suicide prevention project. He had the measure put into House Bill 2, the General Appropriation Act of 2007, as a line item in the New Mexico Department of Health budget. The youth group advocated to insert the balance of \$50,000 into a supplementary funding bill, but time ran out.

Nonetheless, the teen’s work was considered a success. Partial funding was secured and the level of awareness about suicide in Native American communities was increased. More importantly, the Youth Advisory Group at Laguna-Acoma High School Teen Center was fully empowered and is now beginning to look at legislative priorities for the 2008 session.

Summing up her experience of impacting policy to support her community, 17-year-old Samantha Carr says, “We as youth need to know how much power we have and how much we can accomplish. It may not be just one of us, it may take a group of us. We must take advantage of opportunities to do things and change things. It’s not just adults that have power. In some cases, we have even more power to effect change and need to take advantage of it.”



Members of the Laguna-Acoma Teen Center Youth Advisory Group

The **New Mexico Assembly on School-Based Health Care** is one of 10 recipients of multiyear funding from W.K. Kellogg Foundation for its national School-Based Health Care Policy Program. The Assembly represents about 80-school-based health care centers in the state.

Launched in 2004, the **School-Based Health Care Policy Program** aims to make quality care more accessible and sustainable for children and youth. A fundamental principle of the program is the promotion of a consumer-centered model of quality care—one in which local people, including youth, shape the content, quality, delivery, and financing of health care in their communities.

For more information, visit www.nmasssembly.org or www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org

