



Combatting Food Insecurity on Native American Reservations

To live healthy lives, Tribal communities must have access to healthy food and clean drinking water – it’s as simple as that. However, the choice to eat nutritious foods is not a given on remote reservations. Rather, one in four Native American families is facing food insecurity – uncertain access to enough healthy, affordable food for the nourishment they need.

To live healthy lives, Tribal communities must have access to healthy food and clean drinking water – it’s as simple as that. But with 1 in 4 Native families facing food insecurity, this choice is not a given.

This is largely due to a storied history of Native Americans being saddled with a traditional Western diet and food dependency when the reservations were formed. This, in turn, drives food-related diseases, including obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. In fact, diabetes disproportionately impacts [Native youth](#) aged 10-19 and impacts [Native Elders](#) aged 65 and up twice as much as Whites.

While the U.S. government provides food commodities to low-income tribal members, as they do other low-income Americans, this has been problematic too. These commodities are healthier today, but early on, they were

limited to foods low in nutritional value and high in fats and carbohydrates, which fueled obesity for 48 percent of AIAN people in the U.S.

Fast Facts

Native American vs US Norms

- ✓ Food insecurity is uncertain access to enough healthy, affordable food for proper nourishment.
- ✓ Food insecurity affects many of the reservations in PWNA’s service area.
- ✓ Native families are 400% more likely to report not having enough to eat.
- ✓ Food deserts devoid of fresh fruits and vegetables are prevalent on many reservations.
- ✓ Native Elders are twice as likely as Whites to have diabetes.
- ✓ 48% of AIAN people in the U.S. suffer from obesity.
- ✓ 48% of reservation households lack access to clean, running water.

The Native American Food Movement

“Food deserts” are another factor in food insecurity. Food deserts are rural areas devoid of fresh fruits and vegetables, not to mention grocery stores within 10 miles. The sheer absence of healthy, whole foods fuels poor

diets and health issues, and so does impoverishment. In fact, Native American families are 400 percent more likely than other U.S. households to report not having enough to eat. In Tribal communities, it is not only food but jobs that are scarce.

One last factor in nutrition and health is water insecurity. In the United States, communities of color face unequal access to [water](#) – and this impacts 48% of households on Native American reservations. Still, in 2023, the [Supreme Court](#) ruled that “tribes have right to as much water as they need to establish a permanent homeland” on the reservations, yet the government has no responsibility to aid them with access to clean water.

In 2023 alone, PWNA delivered more than 430,000 pounds of fresh produce, ancestral and staple foods, and nearly 200,000 bottles of water to the reservations.

Across Indian County, there is a growing movement to return to the healthy, ancestral foods that predate diabetes. The “Native American Food Movement” has people taking up gardening to ensure access to fresh produce, self-reliance, and independence from inadequate food systems, but there’s more to be done.

In keeping with our dual mission of immediate relief and long-term solutions, PWNA delivered more than 430,000 pounds of fresh produce, ancestral and staple foods, and nearly 200,000 bottles of water to the reservations in 2023 alone. To support a return to healthier diets, PWNA utilizes Native chefs through its Train-the-Trainer (T3) service, who teach healthy cooking with locally available foods, foraging, and food preservation on the reservations.

We integrate tradition and culture into these projects, increasing community engagement while encouraging healthier lifestyles. PWNA also collaborates with Native chefs and local cooks to conduct community food demos, taste tests, and preparation of healthy recipes with fresh produce.

Tyrone Thompson, a Navajo farmer and chef from Leupp, Arizona, led a T3 class with PWNA at the Phoenix Indian School Visitor Center in 2022.



One of his favorite things about it was “meeting the people from different tribes and learning from each other.” He also noted that T3 events are culturally relevant, supporting the Native American Food Movement. “Native cuisine isn’t really talked about today, backgrounds... learning from all the chefs and learning and [T3] helps decolonize our cuisine – reclaim our pre-colonial roots, return to healthy Indigenous foods, and keep alive our cultural knowledge of ‘food as medicine.’”

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How You Can Get Involved

PWNA invites you to join us in decreasing the food insecurity and health concerns of Native Americans. Even the smallest monetary gift from you – or a bulk, in-kind donation of fresh fruits and vegetables – can help fuel nutrition in remote Tribal communities. To learn more about what you can do, please visit [our website](#).