



## **Health care executive shares her COVID-19 story, strategies for virus**

Tonya Ortiz-Louis knows what it's like to be on both sides of the COVID-19 equation — the health care provider on the frontlines helping stricken patients and becoming one herself.

“I’m very grateful that I am alive today, considering the significant and life-threatening symptoms that I was experiencing,” Ortiz-Louis told the *Gallup Sun* Dec. 7. “This entire experience really reminded me that COVID-19 has no boundaries — it doesn’t matter how young or old you are; whether you think you have a good immune system or you don’t have any underlying health care conditions.”

The executive director of Pueblo of Acoma Health and Human Services who said in her 40 years of life her only trip to the hospital was to deliver her children, suddenly found herself in the ER after suffering from coronavirus symptoms during a hike with her daughter, who had COVID-19.

In her position in the pueblo, Ortiz-Louis serves more than 2,000 Native American residents and continues to promote the strategies she has implemented to combat COVID-19 in the Pueblo of Acoma, which is located between Albuquerque and Gallup.

Ortiz-Louis published an online article this past fall claiming that at one point the Acoma Pueblo

saw a decreasing number of cases compared to Cibola County. She attributed the trend to the pueblo’s response and “willingness to innovate our health systems.”

Lately, however, the case and death count in both places continues to rise. Following the Thanksgiving holiday, Ortiz-Louis said the pueblo has been experiencing a higher number of confirmed COVID cases.

“Much like many tribal communities nationally, we have been impacted very significantly,” Ortiz-Louis said. “Our tribal health and human services infrastructure [was] not necessarily ... well prepared for the long-term impacts of COVID-19.”

Pueblo of Acoma Health and Human Services provides behavioral health, social service, and wellness care. It also includes a senior center and a food distribution program.

Acoma Health and Human Services provides basic information about COVID-19 on its website, including a regular updated ticker on case counts and deaths.

## ***ACOMA AND COVID-19***

Ortiz-Louis said as of Dec. 7, there are approximately 2,650 tribal members in the Pueblo of Acoma. Throughout the pandemic, there have been a total of 406 positive coronavirus cases there and 16 deaths.

The health care services executive noted that many of those who died from COVID-19 were elderly.

“For us, being more of a tight-knit community, I will say that one death of an elder is very significant,” Ortiz-Louis said.

## **‘No boundaries’**

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Commenting on the confirmed cases, she said, “**C**onsidering that we have very limited resources within the community and a small community health program, this has taken quite the toll on what resources we have.”

Ortiz-Louis hopes that safety protocols among the pueblo population will continue “until we are certain that a vaccine is well into treatment” and her community starts to see a decline in cases.

“This will really remain in an unforeseeable future, which is why we are wanting to ensure that we have a plan in place that we can reassess along the way,” she said when asked about her outlook on the coronavirus pandemic in her community.

In her article, Ortiz-Louis says Acoma Health and Human Services took swift measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, including limiting travel by visitors, testing, and the implementation of masks and social distancing.

She explained that the pueblo provides “a level of care that is conducive of this new way of living,” including working to ensure that its patients in the pueblo receive care via telehealth. This will allow “us to provide non-face-to-face monitoring engagement for patients.”

“That’s very conducive to being located in a rural tribal community,” Ortiz-Louis said.

This telehealth method includes a “solution suite” called [Zoeticx ProVizion](#) , which allows for the provider to continuously collect and analyze patient information, using remote monitoring.

“Living in a rural community often means we have to travel a distance to emergency room services,” she said. “This would then allow for that communication between a provider and patient, prior to any serious emergencies happening along the way.”

## **EXPERIENCING COVID-19**

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Ortiz-Louis wears many hats. She is on the frontlines visiting and monitoring positive COVID patients delivering food and PPE.

She did all of that until she got COVID-19 herself.

After that, she experienced a “downward spiral” and ended up in the hospital.

After being released, Ortiz-Louis has had some time to reflect on her illness as well as the importance of safety protocols, including hand-washing and wearing a mask.

“Those are practices being put in place ... to save lives,” Ortiz-Louis said.

Getting COVID-19 was a professional “lesson for me.”

“It allowed me to recognize the gaps in services that exist,” Ortiz-Louis said, “and to identify areas that I can make improvements within the Pueblo that allow for us, again, to lead this way to wellness.”

By Kevin Opsahl  
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