

Community Health Alliance tackles more than medicine

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun
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A collaborative environment connecting McKinley, Navajo Nation and Zuni Pueblo

The McKinley Community Health Alliance celebrated its twentieth anniversary Jan. 10 at the New Mexico Cancer Center. For two decades, the alliance has collaborated with various entities in McKinley County, Navajo Nation and Zuni Pueblo to address health disparities across the region.

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Starting in 1998, the MCHA began with the mission of promoting the health and well being of all people in the county and neighboring area. Today, their mission is to affect and facilitate change in systems.

Building the alliance up to the position it holds today took decades of work and planning. Dr. Jana Gunnell and Jeff Kiely of the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments were among its original founding members, and they shared an overview of those early efforts.

“This started as a defensive body. There were some decisions made in Santa Fe that had a profound impact on our communities, but there had been no consultation,” Gunnell said.

Medicaid reform was the heart of the issue.

Concerned citizens met for the first time as a group to oppose the reform. People from various backgrounds attended that initial meeting and began working together.

The decision was eventually overturned and the group decided to continue meeting.

Kiely commended the growth of the alliance and recalled its early days of collaboration. Crucially, he cited their decision not to utilize Robert’s Rules of Order, a rulebook frequently used to structure organizations, for facilitating the meetings.

“We talked about how we would be non-hierarchical: we would not be north-to-south, we would not be top-down, we would not have unnecessary formalities. We would be on a first name basis, there would be no chairperson or vice chairperson,” he said.

The decision was made to have the meetings facilitated to ensure it was participatory and gave everyone a voice.

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“We were building a culture together, a very conscious and intentional culture not adopted or adapted from any particular tradition, but our own sharing of each other so that we would be incredibly diverse around the table,” Kiely said.

Today, the collective is looking at leadership development, diabetes prevention, addressing legacy uranium mining and safe drinking water. Other issues include access to health care, school performance, affordable housing and solid waste disposal.

Gunnell said the wide range of topics illustrates that health is about much more than medicine.

“It’s about poverty and asset inequity,” she said. “It’s about institutional racism. It’s about multi-generational trauma. Twenty years ago, people were not talking like that very much. The meetings were an important opportunity for me to look at my own layers and layers of white privilege and racism.”

MCHA has worked with the U.S. Congress, New Mexico Legislature, Gallup City Council and New Mexico County Commission to affect change in such areas as suicide prevention, predatory lending, community training and workshops, and securing funding that amounted to approximately \$3 million to support health improvement programs in McKinley County.

Christopher Hudson, facilitator and coordinator of MCHA, said he began participating with the group after his aunt asked for help taking notes at the meetings about a year ago.

“I know the future is uncertain in the current administration and whether or not this alliance will last. I’m pretty sure it will, if we’ve weathered storms before,” he said.

He said the group is currently working with Strong Families, New Mexico Social Justice, Behavioral Health Collaborative and Behavioral Health Investment Zone.

“My hope is that we really get down to our base this year, our grassroots people,” Hudson said.

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One woman identified herself as a community member and represented people at the grassroots level. Kim Wahpupah said her current work with the MCHA and the Seven Indigenous Communities is a big change from where she was at a few years ago.

“Before I started out here, I was homeless. [Living in a] shelter and it seemed like my voice didn’t matter,” she said.

Over the past six years, she pushed her daughter’s stroller through town with a boxful of food and made the rounds to distribute food to those in need.

“I thank the health alliance for giving me that voice,” Wahpupah said. “I’m getting back on my feet again and it’s been a fight. There was a lot of adversity out there, the words, the criticism, the low self-esteem that I had to endure. Getting more involved, that’s all I wanted to do.”

The MCHA meets monthly at the New Mexico Cancer Center and public is invited to join. The group convenes on the second Wednesday of the month from 11 am – 1 pm.

For more information call (505) 906-2671.

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