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The U.S. Government's Failed COVID-19 Response Echoes Historic Mistreatment of Native Americans

WASHINGTON, DC — The U.S. government's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts across the country, but perhaps nowhere more than in Indian Country, where the neglect echoes historic mistreatment of Native Americans, experts said in a recent panel event hosted by [MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger](#). The panel, which coincided with Native American Heritage Month, featured experts in this field and addressed various ways to strengthen food security and food sovereignty in Indian Country.

These charges follow a dramatic spike in COVID-19 rates among Native Americans. [Cases are rising in states with large Native American populations](#), and Native Americans are [3.5 more likely to contract the virus](#) than white people.

MAZON has long been concerned with issues of food insecurity and sovereignty in Indian Country, and the national Jewish organization recently joined an [historic investment](#) in Native agriculture advocacy. As a leading voice on anti-hunger issues, MAZON's [long standing commitment](#) to Indian Country is a vital piece of its work to advance solutions for food insecure populations that are often overlooked by policymakers and the general public.

"For thousands of years before contact, indigenous peoples sustained politically and culturally vibrant societies that were as diverse as they were dynamic," said Mia Hubbard, MAZON's Vice President of Programs, during a recent panel event that was held in conjunction with MAZON's third annual [Jewish Clergy Justice Mission](#). "The legacy of colonization and conquest has left deep wounds and harms on indigenous communities, and food is very much a part of that story," she continued.

Crystal Echo Hawk, founder and executive director of [IllumiNative](#), joined MAZON's event, discussing the pandemic's impact on Native Americans. "Because of the federal government's failure to do its job and show up when COVID-19 hit, folks began to self-organize in Tribal communities," said Ms. Echo Hawk. "Tribal leadership stepped up. The average Tribal citizen stepped up and said we need to take care of our own."

Tribes, like the [Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe](#) in South Dakota, implemented checkpoints on roads that run through their reservation, set up testing, and implemented mask mandates when the state opposed implementing them.

There are 573 sovereign federally-recognized Tribal nations as well as state-recognized and unrecognized Tribes. While this lends itself to diversity, a unifier is that food systems are important beyond just the provision of sustenance, nutrition, and calories — they are intertwined with land, language, ceremony, tradition, and overall health and wellness.

“What I love about food is that it ties everything together. It is the culture, it is the history, but it's also the environment. It's also economic development,” said Maria Givens, Communications and Public Relations Director at the [Native American Agriculture Fund](#), which was established by the settlement of a landmark class-action lawsuit over discrimination by USDA, and is now the largest philanthropic organization devoted solely to serving the Native American farming and ranching community.

MAZON and its partners have been urging Congress and the Administration to boost SNAP benefits to combat growing hunger in the wake of COVID-19, as well as looking ahead to the next Farm Bill, which will be a critical opportunity to strengthen food and agriculture systems in Indian Country. Programs like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) — which is the only federal food program that targets Native Americans living on or near reservations — are crucial tools to combat hunger, bolster and expand public health infrastructure, and build vibrant Tribal agriculture economies.

According to Colby Duren, Director of Policy and Government Relations at the [Intertribal Agriculture Council](#), relationship-building is key to making legislation more effective and inclusive. “We're finally getting to the point where Tribes are actually sitting at the table, during the drafting process, early on in the process,” Duren said.

Ms. Givens shared optimism for the future: “We invest in our youth, and that’s where we can make the biggest impact — where we get the highest return on our investment is when we are investing in these youth and getting them connected to their culture and their land and through all of these food system programs.”

To watch a recording of MAZON’s Jewish Clergy Justice Mission panel, “From Erasure to Resilience: The Future of Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Indian Country,” [click here](#).

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About MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel. Learn more at mazon.org