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News | Nation

American Indian, Alaska Native providers improve community health

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Increasing the number of American Indian and Alaska Native health care providers can better address the health care needs of the population. Yet the Association of American Medical Colleges reports that from 1974 to 2005, applications to medical school from those populations decreased by 9 percent. New cross-sector collaborations are working to turn the trend around.

Research has long shown that people have better health outcomes when they see themselves reflected in their providers. The health disparities in American Indian and Alaska Native populations could be reduced with more Native American providers, said Karen Knight, executive director of tribal relations for UnitedHealthcare in Oklahoma and an MLS student of Indigenous People Law at the University of Oklahoma.



Photo courtesy Allison Beres/Abel Communications

“The...data show that Native American students who graduate from medical school regularly return to their communities to serve,” Knight told The Nation’s Health. “Understanding how these data points fit together was an important part of the summit and our of collaboration.”

The Association of American Indian Physicians in June partnered with the Association of American Medical Colleges, UnitedHealthcare and Optum for the 2018 AI/AN Physicians Summit in Washington, D.C. There, health care providers, industry leaders and students came together to discuss how improvements can be made to increase American Indian and Alaska Native applicants and graduates in medical school and other health professions.

Jennifer Meylor, a member of the Osage and Cherokee Nation, a third-year medical student at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and a board member for the Association of Native American Medical Students, spoke at the summit about the need for increased recruitment for American Indian and Alaska Native medical students. Meylor said she was inspired to see the efforts the association takes to increase the representation of Native American students in medical school.

Meylor, who is seeking a career in neurology, hopes to work in Indian Country addressing the high prevalence of neurologic disease, including epilepsy, Alzheimer’s disease and diabetic neuropathy.

“I plan to continue to serve indigenous communities throughout my career as a physician,” Meylor told The Nation’s Health. “It was great to hear that other medical schools recognized the same benefits of training Native medical students that I have: increasing service to underserved communities and providing role models and mentors to other Native American students interested in the field of medicine.”

A white paper of findings and actions from the June summit will be released in October.

For more, visit www.aaip.org.

American Indian and Alaska Native students, including Darcia Pingree, center, from Carroll College in Montana, discuss how they can increase their numbers in medical school at a summit in June in Washington, D.C.

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