

# FEEDING OURSELVES

*Food access, health disparities, and the pathways  
to healthy Native American communities*



REPORT PREPARED BY ECHO HAWK CONSULTING

COMMISSIONED BY THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION AND VOICES FOR HEALTHY KIDS

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*For a subject worked and reworked so often in novels,  
motion pictures and television, American Indians remain  
probably the least understood and most misunderstood  
Americans of us all.*

President John F. Kennedy  
1963

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*“When we were strong in our foods on this continent, we were stronger people – we were healthier. And for Indigenous peoples it all starts with the food. When Indian Country lost its ability to feed itself, through whatever means, we lost that part of ourselves that supports our ability to thrive. It is only by regaining our foods will we be able to restore our health, our resilience as peoples and secure the stability and diversification within our own communities and local economies. But the challenges to secure that future require different approaches than those used in other communities and in predominately urban settings, if for no other reason than our unique legal status, the remote location of our lands upon which foods can be found, and the language, cultural traditions, and legal status of our communities.”*

Janie Hipp  
Director, Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative,  
University of Arkansas School of Law

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The loss of Native American lands and purposeful destruction of Native cultures is ink on the fabric of American history. Now-repudiated federal policies that forcibly separated Native peoples from our historical lands and traditional sources of food are manifesting in our bodies today. Separation from healthy foods has been one of the most pernicious health problems we endure. The epidemics of obesity and diabetes in Native communities, even among our children, are direct consequences of limited access to healthy food. In many tribal communities, poverty, inequality, the lack of access to capital, and myriad and complex bureaucratic barriers undermine our current capacities to reestablish strong and vibrant Indian Country food systems.

This report, *Feeding Ourselves: Food Access, Health Disparities, and the Pathways to Healthy Native American Communities*, explores the complex historical and contemporary challenges to Native American healthy

food access, childhood obesity, and health disparities. Looking first at the historical context of colonization, the treatment of Native Americans as sovereign Tribal Nations, and the evolution of Federal Indian policy, *Feeding Ourselves* frames the work ahead to engage and assist Native communities in moving beyond this condition.

*Feeding Ourselves* encourages its readers to take the first step toward a solution – becoming aware of the extent of the problem of Native health disparities and its deep interconnections to U.S. Indian policy, poverty, historical trauma and food systems. This includes building awareness of the complex historic and present-day situations of Native peoples, innovative models, and how systemic and long-term changes may be supported by policy changes at the tribal, federal, and philanthropic levels.

The goal of *Feeding Ourselves* is to inform and inspire tribal leaders, grassroots activists, philanthropists, and policymakers to identify mutual goals and opportunities to invest in strategies to create lasting systems and policy change that will strengthen Native American food systems, increase access to healthy and affordable foods, revitalize Native cultures and economies, and improve the health outcomes of Native American children and families.

Momentum is already underway by a number of tribes, Native communities, nonprofits, educational institutions, advocates and non-Native champions to create meaningful change to the food systems, diet, health, lives and wellbeing of Native peoples. This report presents some case studies of and lessons learned from Native-led innovations that are creating positive change.

The scope of the report is focused primarily on Tribal (rural and reservation) food access and health issues. While many Native peoples now reside in urban centers, the deep social, political, spiritual, cultural connections with the land base that is defined as Indian Country can not only provide the impetus for improving food systems within remote and reservation communities, but can become inextricably linked to improving the health and wellbeing of urban Indian citizens.

*Feeding Ourselves* challenges philanthropy, public health experts and policymakers to partner with Native leadership and stakeholders to create a framework for racial and health equity as we move forward together. There is no shortage of opportunity to make a profound difference through strategic partnership, respect for Tribal sovereignty, Native American knowledge, cultures and community-driven solutions.

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The first two chapters, “An Historical Overview: Colonization, The Evolution of U.S. Federal Indian Policy and Contemporary Indian Country” and “Indian Country Food Systems: An Historical Overview and Contemporary Challenges of Native Food Systems, Diet and Health” present the evolution of U.S. Indian policy and its impact on the political, socio-economic and cultural realities of Native peoples that underpin the immense challenges that Native peoples face today. This includes highly negative consequences on Native food systems, diets and health.

The next chapter, “Indian Country Food Systems Today: Native Agriculture, Federal Feeding Programs, Markets and Healthy Food Financing,” features where food is coming from in Native communities, the role of markets in crafting sustainable solutions to healthy food access and the challenges of financing food-related ventures.

The “Healthy Food Access in Indian Country: Innovations, Investment and Stakeholders” chapter highlights how Native communities are creating their own solutions from the ground up, the invaluable role played by Native intermediary funders and technical assistance providers, and support provided by some federal programs.

Case studies of grassroots advocacy, a Native intermediary funder, and a federal program are featured in “Indian Country Healthy Food Access Case Studies: Lessons Learned by Grassroots, Nonprofit and Federal Agencies.”

“We Stand On the Solution: Recommendations to Empower Indian Country Food Systems and Health” offers an outline of market-driven and policy-driven

(at the tribal, federal and philanthropic levels) solutions that, if implemented, will begin to create change within institutions that will have lasting and positive effects on Native food systems.

And finally, “Steps toward Increased and Strategic Partnership with Indian Country: Recommendations for Funders, Stakeholders and Policymakers” concludes this report by encouraging a deeper level of understanding of this issue and how diverse partners may engage and move forward together.

It is with a sense of urgency and hope that the authors offer Feeding Ourselves. Not only are Native health disparities threatening the very future of tribal communities, but concurrently, the time is ripe for opportunities to make a profound difference through strategic partnership, respect for Tribal sovereignty, Native American knowledge, cultures and community-driven solutions. The futures of Native children and Tribal Nations are at stake. The time to come together and act is now.

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS: “WE STAND ON THE SOLUTION”

There are roles for all concerned who strive to provide every Native American family and individual with increased access to healthy foods and address the health disparities experienced by Native communities. Partnership and collaboration between various entities and stakeholders is of paramount importance.

In presenting recommendations for tribes, philanthropic funders, federal government agencies, educational institutions, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), service providers and Native food producers, one recurring central theme is increased tribal control of assets related to food production and purchasing for and by Native

communities. Placing decision-making power within Native hands will best benefit the health of their community members also will have positive economic, social, cultural, environmental and infrastructure effects.

Below is a summary of recommendations that is further detailed in the chapter, “*We Stand on the Solution: Recommendations to Empower Indian Country Food Systems and Health.*”

#### FOR TRIBES:

- Advocate for and secure tribal control of federally-funded feeding programs for tribal communities, with the accompanying ability to infuse purchasing decisions to emphasize Native locally produced healthy foods and healthy foods traditional to tribal culture;
- Support agricultural and natural resources with tribal policies that mandate sustainable management of water, community member access to land for food production and for subsistence hunting and gathering;
- Prioritize the production and marketing of healthy foods by financially supporting Native food producers’ transition to production of crops with improved nutritional value, establishing a lending preference for healthy food production, incentivizing healthy food outlets and small-scale health food stores, financially supporting market-based linkages such as farm-to-school and other similar programs, and encouraging healthy food labelling and marketing;
- Adopt a policy preferring the purchase of healthy foods produced by tribal citizens at tribally-run institutions;
- Discourage the purchase and consumption of unhealthy foods by taxing “junk” foods and prohibiting the purchase of unhealthy foods at tribally-run institutions;

- Support a pipeline of Native healthy food producers and food-centered entrepreneurs through academic scholarships, internships, mentorship and apprenticeships and through development of successful food business models;
- Engage the tribal community in conducting community food assessments and planning to enhance control of the local food system;
- Encourage the implementation of tribal-level policies that address the full range of food and agriculture needs and encourage intertribal coordination of food and agriculture activities; and
- Partner with local, regional and national allies to develop and implement an integrated approach to food system management, enhancing health, the economy, the environment and the preservation of tribal cultures.

#### FOR FEDERAL AGENCIES:

- Study the feasibility of placing management of all feeding programs within USDA Food and Nutrition Service’s jurisdiction under direct tribal government management;
- Ensure greater use of traditional foods within federal feeding programs and as donated food product in all public institutional settings in Indian Country;
- Recalibrate federal feeding programs to better support the local use of Native lands and tribal ability to solve local food access problems;
- Ensure that all agencies at USDA, BIA, and all other federal agencies commit the necessary support and resources to strengthen, support, build and grow healthy food alternatives in Indian Country;
- Create funding programs that will support Native consumers’ healthy food access through small-scale, “self-help” grocery stores and financially supporting healthy foods incentive programs in

Indian Country; and

- Enhance tribal control of and participation in the local food system by supporting local and regional food processing and packaging infrastructure development.

#### FOR FOUNDATIONS:

- Fund Native community engagement strategies around the local food system; demonstration models and networks related to healthy food production and/or marketing; capacity building technical assistance for service providers; Native intermediary funders that provide on-the-ground expertise; support for grassroots organizers and organizations; CDFIs that support healthy food businesses; and Native-controlled educational institutions that help to launch the careers of Native food entrepreneurs and that conduct supportive research and policy analysis.
- Convene tribes, public agencies, philanthropic players, public health experts, and Native and non-Native nonprofit organizations to develop consensus, identify expertise and roles, and create plans for local and systemic change; and
- Partner with grantmaking tribes and tribally-led nonprofit organizations to leverage larger-scale joint programs and networks.

#### AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION AND VOICES FOR HEALTHY KIDS

This report was commissioned by the American Heart Association (AHA) and its Voices for Healthy Kids®, a joint initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and AHA. Voices for Healthy Kids works to help all young people eat healthier foods and be more active. Nearly one in three kids and teens are overweight or obese. By engaging, organizing and mobilizing people in communities across the United States, Voices for Healthy Kids will help make the



healthy choice the easy choice in the places where children live, learn, and play.

AHA and Voices for Healthy Kids have established a commitment to further their own knowledge and that of the larger fields of public health, philanthropy and healthy food access about Native Americans and “Indian Country,” in order to better understand how they can engage and partner with Tribes and Native Americans to improve access to healthy and affordable food, reduce childhood obesity and address health disparities.

### CONTRIBUTORS AND APPRECIATION

The authors of this report are deeply appreciative not only of AHA/Voices for Healthy Kids’ investment in commissioning this report but to the numerous contributors, research and work of various organizations that informed its content and recommendations. We would like to extend our deep gratitude to:

- University of Arkansas School of Law’s Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative;<sup>1</sup>
- First Nations Development Institute;<sup>2</sup>
- The Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation;<sup>3</sup>
- The Praxis Project’s Communities Creating Healthy Environments (CCHE) Program;<sup>4</sup>
- The Native Organizers Alliance (NOA), a project of the Alliance for a Just Society (CCHE Indian Country technical assistance partner);<sup>5</sup>
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation;<sup>6</sup>
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation;<sup>7</sup> and
- The Diné Policy Institute.<sup>8</sup>

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- NB3 Foundation;
- The Praxis Project;
- Food Trust; and
- Voices for Healthy Kids.

### ABOUT ECHO HAWK CONSULTING AND THE AUTHORS



#### CRYSTAL ECHO HAWK

*President & CEO, Echo Hawk Consulting*

Crystal Echo Hawk is a member of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma. For more than 18 years, Crystal has served as an advocate for the health, wellbeing and rights of Tribes, Native American children and families. Crystal and her firm, Echo Hawk Consulting, provide expert consulting services in executive leadership, fundraising, philanthropic giving, community development, program design, partnership development, evaluation and



communications. Clients include Tribes, dynamic grantmakers, businesses, nonprofit organizations and philanthropic individuals focused on supporting culturally appropriate and community-driven social change, strategic partnerships and increased investment in Native American communities.

Prior to leading Echo Hawk Consulting, Crystal served as the Executive Director for the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation from 2009-2014. The NB3 Foundation is a national Native American nonprofit organization established by 4-time PGA TOUR winner and NBC Sports/ Golf Channel TV Analyst Notah Begay III. During her tenure, Crystal helped to grow the NB3 Foundation from a small grassroots organization to an organization that reinvested more than \$9.7 million to fight the grave health issues facing Native children through strategic grantmaking, health and wellness programming, technical assistance, research and advocacy that benefitted more than 50 Native American communities, tribes and 24,000 Native children and families in 13 states.

Before her work with the NB3 Foundation, Crystal served as the Assistant Development Director for the Native American Rights Fund and Tribal Planner for the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma. Crystal received both her Master's Degree in Social and Political Thought and Bachelor's Degree in European History from the University of Sussex at Falmer, England.

#### JANIE HIPPI

*Director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative,  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Law*

Professor Janie Hipp serves as the Director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative and has the companion title of visiting professor of law. She is a member of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma.

The Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative encompasses multi-disciplinary research, services, and education opportunities. The Initiative is the first of its

kind nationally, and seeks to directly support Indian Country by providing strategic planning and technical assistance, education and professional development, in:

- Tribal Governance Infrastructure to Enhance Business and Economic Development Opportunities;
- Financial Markets and Asset Management, including Banking, Risk Management, and Stewardship of Land and Natural Resources; and
- Health and Nutrition Policy for Tribal Community Wellness,
- Intellectual Property Rights and Protection of Traditional Knowledge.

Prior to joining the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, she was the senior adviser for tribal relations to Thomas Vilsack, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She is the founder of the USDA's Office of Tribal Relations in the Office of the Secretary, is a former



National Program Leader at the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and served two terms on the USDA Secretary's Advisory Committee for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers.

She is an LL.M. graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Law's Agricultural and Food Law program. In 2014, she was named a Distinguished Alumni by the University of Arkansas Alumni Association and a Distinguished Member of the American Agricultural Law Association. She holds a J.D. from Oklahoma City University and a B.A. in Social Work from the University of Oklahoma.

#### WILSON PIPESTEM

*Founder, Pipestem Law and Ietan Consulting*

Wilson Pipestem's professional career has been dedicated to advocacy on behalf of American Indians and tribal governments. His advocacy in the federal courts led to the largest settlement in U.S. history between an Indian tribe and the federal government in *Osage Nation v. United States*. His advocacy before the Congress and federal agencies has led to the recovery of lost tribal lands, reaffirmation of inherent sovereign rights to determine

tribal governmental and individual identity, and return of tribal criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit domestic and dating violence crimes against Native women.

Wilson is a frequent speaker on developments in federal law and policy. He has taught Federal Indian Law at two law schools and appeared on MSNBC, NPR, and other media regarding tribal sovereignty and Native rights. He serves as a Director of the NIKE N7 Fund and served for six years as Chair of the Notah Begay III Foundation, organizations focused on addressing diabetes and obesity in Native communities through sport and nutrition.

He is a graduate of Stanford Law School and Oklahoma State University (OSU). In 2013, he was named a Distinguished Alumni by the OSU Alumni Association and OSU American Indian Alumni Society. Pipestem is an enrolled member of the Otoe-Missouria Tribe and an Osage Headright holder.





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