



Northwest Portland Area
Indian Health Board
Indian Leadership for Indian Health



NW Tribe Bringing Oral Health Care into 21st Century

Swinomish turn to train and hire dental health aide therapists

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CONTACT: John Stephens, Swinomish Indian Tribal Community 360-319-1698
Pam Johnson, Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board 206-755-4309
Sarah Beccio, National Congress of American Indians 410-371-5551

ST. PAUL, Minnesota –The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community today announced the launch of an innovative new program to better address the oral health crisis in Indian country and help bring tribal oral health into the 21st century.

“Oral health is essential to overall health,” said Brian Cladoosby, Chairman of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. “We cannot have healthy communities without access to reliable, high quality and culturally competent dental care.”

Oral health research shows that lack of access to providers and historical traumas have caused Indians to lead the nation in oral disease rates, with Indian children today suffering tooth decay at three times the national average.

“We as Indians have long faced an oral health crisis, and the crisis is only growing,” said Cladoosby. “But there just aren’t enough dentists in Indian country to address this crisis. The Swinomish dental clinic sees more than twice the number of patients per provider as the national average. That’s why we are expanding the Swinomish dental team through the proven solution of training and employing dental health aide therapists.”

Similar to nurse practitioners and physician assistants, dental health aide therapists are highly trained mid-level dental providers who expand the capacity of dentists by delivering a number of routine and preventive dental services, including fillings and simple extractions.

As part of a community-driven solution, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium introduced the first successful dental therapist workforce in the United States over ten years ago. Since then, the program has expanded care to more than 45,000 Alaska Natives in dire need of consistent preventive and restorative care. After seeing the success in Alaska, states and tribes nationwide have sought to have providers like DHATs, called dental therapists, practice in their communities. As a result, dental therapists have been practicing in Minnesota since 2011 and were authorized to practice in Maine last year.

“We must break the cycle of poor oral health, and while it may take a generation, we must start now,” said Cladoosby. “Alaska has seen great success in solving a native problem with a native solution. We want to export that success to our community, which is why we are sending a Swinomish Tribal member to Alaska this summer to begin her dental health aide therapy training. When she returns, she will be a Swinomish provider serving the Swinomish community in a dental clinic built by the Tribe on our land.”

“Tribes are sovereign governments, well-equipped to bring the required resources to their tribal communities,” said Jacqueline Johnson Pata, Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians. “The effort launched by the Swinomish today can and should be duplicated by tribes all across the country to better ensure that their members receive the dental care they need. We stand hand in hand with the Swinomish today.”

The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is working in partnership with the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in a regional effort to bring new and innovative dental resources into the Pacific Northwest.

“We applaud this commitment and all efforts that make the challenges and successes of native children and their families a visible and central part of our public discourse,” said La June Montgomery Tabron, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “By modernizing the trust relationship and empowering tribes, as President Cladoosby advocates, tribal-led solutions can be developed to ensure that native children can succeed in school, work and life.”

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The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is a federally recognized Indian Tribe organized pursuant to Section 16 of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, 25 U.S.C. § 476, that occupies the Swinomish Indian Reservation on Puget Sound in Washington State. The Tribe is a present day political successor-in-interest to certain of the tribes and bands that signed the Treaty of Point Elliott, 12 Stat. 927 (1855), that established the Swinomish Reservation on Fidalgo Island.

The Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board is a non-profit tribal advisory organization serving the forty-three federally recognized tribes of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho with a mission to eliminate health disparities and improve the quality of life of American Indians and Alaska Natives by supporting Northwest Tribes in their delivery of culturally appropriate, high quality healthcare.

The National Congress of American Indians, founded in 1944, is the oldest, largest and most representative American Indian and Alaska Native organization serving the broad interests of tribal governments and communities.