RWJF Culture of Health
Community Portrait

San Juan County, New Mexico
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Sentinel Communities Surveillance project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project, which began in 2016, will monitor activities related to how a Culture of Health is developing in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least five years. This community portrait follows from the initial Snapshot report for San Juan County, New Mexico, and provides insights into drivers of a Culture of Health in the community. The report is not intended to comprehensively describe every action underway in San Juan County, but rather focuses on key insights, opportunities, and challenges as a community advances on its journey toward health and well-being for all residents.

The information in this report was obtained using several data collection methods, including key informant telephone interviews, an environmental scan of online and published community-specific materials, review of existing population surveillance and monitoring data, and collection of local data or resources provided by community contacts or interview respondents. Interviews were conducted with individuals representing organizations working in a variety of sectors (for example, health, business, education, faith-based, and environment) in the community. Sector mapping was used to systematically identify respondents in a range of sectors that would have insights about community health and well-being to ensure organizational diversity across the community. We also asked original interviewees to recommend individuals to speak with in an effort to supplement important organizations or perspectives not included in the original sample.

A total of 13 unique respondents were interviewed during fall 2017 for this report. All interviews (lasting 30–75 minutes each) were conducted using semi-structured interview guides tailored to the unique context and activities taking place in each community and to the role of the respondent in the community. Interviewers used probes to ensure that they obtained input on specific items of interest (for example, facilitators and barriers to improved population health, well-being, and equity) and open-ended questions to ensure that they fully addressed and captured participants’ responses and perceptions about influences on health and well-being in their communities. Individuals who participated in a key informant interview are not identified by name or organization to protect confidentiality, but they are identified as a “respondent.”

Information collected through environmental scans includes program and organizational information available on internet websites, publicly available documents, and media reports. Population surveillance and monitoring data were compiled from publicly available datasets, including the American Community Survey; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; and other similar federal, state, and local data sources.

We will conduct ongoing surveillance and monitoring activities in these communities through 2020 and report updated information on their progress, challenges, and lessons learned in improving health and well-being for all residents. Data collection and monitoring thus far has revealed common themes among otherwise distinct communities. The next phase of this project will be cross-community reports that will examine common themes across subgroups of the 30 communities (for example, rural communities, communities experiencing large demographic shifts, and communities leveraging local data for decision-making). These reports will also be posted on rwjf.org/cultureofhealth.
# Table of Contents

## Introduction 1

- **Racial Tensions, Governance, Distant Services Pose Challenges**
- **Improving Health and Equity through County and State Nonprofit Coalition**
- **Advocates Address Environmental Justice**

## Developing a Culture of Health 4

- **Fostering Inclusion and Collective Leadership for Policy Change**
- **Addressing Addiction through Multisector, Nontraditional Partnerships**
- **Improving Environmental Health**
- **Collaborating to Promote Economic Stability and Diversity**
- **Addressing Lack of Health Coverage through Multiple Efforts**

## Summary of County’s Efforts to Build a Culture of Health 8

- **Facilitators to a Culture of Health**
- **Barriers to a Culture of Health**

## References 11
Introduction

In our Snapshot report of San Juan County, N.M., we described a community divided by historical racial tensions and injustices, with marked racial/ethnic disparities in socioeconomic status, health, access to care, and exposure to environmental toxins. Despite considerable barriers to partnerships across the county and on and off the Navajo Nation, promising collaborative efforts have been taking place. In this report, we examine San Juan County’s efforts to improve community well-being using the Culture of Health Action Framework to interpret and organize key findings. The Framework prioritizes four broad Action Areas: 1) Making Health a Shared Value; 2) Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being; 3) Creating Healthier, More Equitable Communities; and 4) Strengthening Integration of Health Services and Systems, within which activities and investments can advance population health, well-being, and equity in diverse community contexts. Using the Framework, we describe how San Juan County is making progress toward empowering disenfranchised populations and redressing racial and ethnic divisions and disparities through multisector collaborations and innovative solutions.

RACIAL TENSIONS, GOVERNANCE, DISTANT SERVICES POSE CHALLENGES

Situated in the northwest corner of New Mexico, San Juan County covers more than 5,500 square miles of geographic diversity and natural beauty, containing the confluence of three rivers, and volcanic structures, buttes, mesas, and badlands. Its rugged land...
contains rich deposits of oil, gas, and coal. The county's population of 125,133 is equally rich and diverse. It comprises 41 percent white, 36 percent American Indian, and 20 percent Hispanic residents. The self-governing Navajo (also referred to as Diné) Nation—which spreads across northwestern New Mexico, northeastern Arizona, and southeastern Utah—occupies approximately 60 percent of the land in San Juan County.

Farmington is the largest city in the county with a population of 44,865 and is a commercial hub for the Four Corners region (the region consisting of the southwestern corner of Colorado, southeastern corner of Utah, northeastern corner of Arizona, and northwestern corner of New Mexico), and home to many of the county's health-related organizations. The city is racially diverse: half of residents are white; the remaining half is equally divided between Hispanic and American Indian populations.

The county includes two cities with populations ranging from 6,000 to 8,000: Aztec, the county seat, and Bloomfield. Shiprock (population 8,135) borders Farmington and is the largest town contained within the borders of San Juan County and the Navajo Nation. Shiprock is 96 percent American Indian (almost all of whom are Navajo). The inclusion of the Navajo Nation within the county boundaries provides unique opportunities and challenges to creating a unified vision for population health. The Navajo Nation is sovereign (self-governing and exempt from state and county laws), enforcing its own laws through tribal police and courts. The nation also delivers its own health and social services and maintains responsibility for its economic development, energy and land management, and public infrastructure. Most agencies within San Juan County that address American Indian health are located on the Navajo Nation in Shiprock. It is home to the Northern Navajo Medical Center (an Indian Health Service [IHS] hospital); a campus of Diné College (a tribally run community college); a Bureau of Indian Affairs office; and a Navajo Chapter House, a unit of the Navajo Nation with governmental authority.

San Juan County's expansiveness presents a challenge to health care access, with many residents living far from services. The population density in Farmington is 1,213 persons per square mile, compared with 21 persons per square mile for the county as a whole and only seven persons per square mile within the Navajo Nation. Much of the population, particularly those living on the Navajo Nation, have to travel for hours to reach a doctor, particularly if specialty care is required. Outside of Farmington, the transportation infrastructure is severely inadequate with poorly maintained roads and extremely limited mass transit options. A health sector representative familiar with the transportation infrastructure is equally divided between Hispanic and American Indian populations.

San Juan County earned the nickname “the Selma of the Southwest,” following a 1974 investigation into the murder of three Indian men by white teenagers. A U.S. Civil Rights Commission documented a deeply rooted climate of systemic racism, violence, and denigration of American Indians and their culture; a return visit three decades later found evidence of continued covert racism, health and economic disparities, and an imbalance in the racial and ethnic makeup of the county power structure.  

American Indians are not the only residents who experience struggles relating to their racial and ethnic identity. Anti-immigrant policies and sentiments have negatively affected San Juan County's sizable Hispanic population. Beginning in 2012, residents became concerned over a growing trend among local law enforcement and immigration officials to question and detain residents based on race and ethnicity. This bias led them to a class-action lawsuit supporting the rights of the Hispanic population, which was filed in 2014 and settled in 2017. The settlement partially reduced residents' fear of separation from family and generated more confidence to exercise their rights, according to one respondent from the nonprofit sector. “It is proof of what is possible when we come together, organize to defend our rights under the constitution and fight back.”

The energy industry looms large in San Juan County, with mineral and fossil fuel extraction providing an abundance of well-paying jobs and a tax base that supports many health/social service agencies. In 2015, mining (including fossil fuel extraction) represented nearly 12 percent of San Juan's nonfarm private employment, compared with about 4 percent in New Mexico and less than 1 percent for the United States. Fifty-eight percent of employees in this sector are white, 27 percent are American Indian, and 14 percent are Hispanic. White residents are somewhat more highly represented in this sector relative to their percentage of the population. Overreliance on this volatile industry has led to job insecurity and loss, fiscal uncertainty, population transience, and extensive environmental contamination. The county has lost 6,000 fossil fuel–related jobs because of drops in oil prices since 2010. Underscoring the reliance on these jobs, San Juan County's population decreased by more than 7 percent, while New Mexico's population increased by approximately 1 percent. The Navajo...
Nation is heavily dependent on the mining sector. Fifty-one percent of the Nation’s revenues are from mining. Residents are bracing for the impact on local revenues of the 2022 planned closing of the San Juan Generating Station (a coal-powered electricity-generating station in the area). If the generating station closes, San Juan College will see a $2 million cutback in funding, and 31 percent of the Central Consolidated School District’s property tax base will be threatened.

Striking inequities in economic prosperity and health exist throughout San Juan County, with American Indians and Hispanics more likely to struggle with poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment than white residents. Data are most dire for those living on the Navajo Nation: 43 percent live below the poverty line; unemployment rests at 42 percent; and most do not have the educational level to compete for the high-paying jobs in the energy sector. American Indians and Hispanics also experience disproportionate rates of diabetes, liver disease, alcohol-related injuries, suicide, depression, and alcohol abuse. These disparities are compounded by differences in access to health care because of transportation barriers, high rates of uninsurance, and severe physician shortages in rural areas. Although New Mexico’s uninsured rate dropped from 20 percent to 15 percent in 2014 following its expansion of Medicaid, about 25 percent of San Juan County residents remain uninsured, a rate higher than the state (18%) and the nation (14%). Racial/ethnic differences in coverage contribute to longstanding health disparities: 40 percent of American Indians and 25 percent of Hispanics lack health insurance compared with 16 percent of whites. American Indians and Hispanics are less likely to have a primary health care provider, and San Juan County has been designated as a health professional shortage area, with extreme shortage levels in primary, dental, and mental health care in its rural areas, particularly on the Navajo Nation.

Fuel extraction has left behind serious environmental contamination including degradation of sacred Navajo sites, raising issues of environmental justice. Advocates are increasingly vocal about the extent to which industrial contamination continues to harm residents of the area. For example, the San Juan Generating Station coal-fired power plant alone emits approximately 100 million pounds of sulfur dioxide, 100 million pounds of nitrogen oxide (NOx), six million pounds of soot, and at least 1,000 pounds of mercury into the air each year. Air pollution negatively impacts health: smog and fine particulates are linked with increases in childhood asthma and respiratory disorders.

Proximity to gas wells is linked with a higher risk for birth defects, hospital visits, and respiratory and skin problems. Further, uranium mining companies operating on Navajo lands left behind open mines that emit dangerously high levels of radiation and contaminated water. Radiation is associated with cancer; research has shown that the prevalence of lung cancer was 20 to 30 times higher among Navajo men who worked in the uranium mines compared with those who did not. Compounding these risks, in 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) spilled three million gallons of toxic mine wastewater into the Animas River, which flows directly through San Juan County. The Navajo Nation could incur up to $335 million in costs related to the spill. As of April 2016, the EPA had compensated the Navajo Nation response agencies only $157,000. As cited in a report from the nonprofit Dream New Mexico: “The double whammy of poverty and energy development hits the vulnerable parts of New Mexico’s population hardest.” During testimony at a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) listening session, a member of the Navajo Nation stated, “People are getting sick—fracking is ruining our land, our farms, our livestock, contaminating our air, our water, our sacred places, our herbs, our medicine. Our people are grieving here, they’re hurting, they are in pain.”

Substance abuse, particularly alcohol misuse, plays a large role in the health struggles of San Juan County residents. In 2014, New Mexico had the highest rate of alcohol-related deaths in the nation, with San Juan County ranking 7th of New Mexico’s 33 counties. Residents of San Juan County are two times more likely to die from alcohol-related injuries and almost three times more likely to die from chronic liver disease than the national average. Over half of motor vehicle crash fatalities in the county involve alcohol compared with the national average of 31 percent. American Indians are particularly hard hit: From 2010 to 2016, 257 American Indians (primarily Navajo) residing in the county died from an accident or illness relating to alcohol-attributable causes. American Indians in San Juan County are 1.7 times more likely to die from an alcohol-related unintentional injury, and twice as likely to be killed in an alcohol-related vehicle crash fatality or die from an alcohol-related chronic disease than the county average. Historical trauma is believed to be at the root of the disproportionate levels of alcohol misuse experienced by American Indians. Although alcohol consumption is not allowed on the Navajo Nation, stakeholders have noted concerns about excessive alcohol consumption in Farmington, where the city borders the Navajo Nation.

Despite conditions that hinder health equity, the county is poised for transformation. San Juan County is home to a cadre of motivated individuals and organizations committed to improving social capital and narrowing health disparities. New conversations and efforts to address racial healing are underway, energizing organizations to become more inclusive and accountable to the community as a whole.

The San Juan Regional Medical Center is a significant connector in many of the county’s health initiatives. The nonprofit, community-owned medical center is run by a corporation made up of representatives from more than 90 local nonprofit organizations. Any nonprofit organization in San Juan County—including civic groups, religious organizations, fraternal organizations, veterans groups, etc.—is permitted to select two representatives from their organization to serve on the corporation.
This design facilitates collaborative information-sharing, prioritizing and strategizing to meet residents’ most urgent health care needs. The design also increases accountability to the community as members from across all sectors contribute to prioritizing health care needs. The hospital was one of five in New Mexico recently recognized by the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association for the quality of care for heart disease and stroke patients, and it is active in the community in efforts to provide free health education classes at numerous sites, including schools and workforce programs. The San Juan Medical Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization governed by a volunteer board of directors that works with San Juan Regional Medical Center to raise and administer funds for special programs.

**IMPROVING HEALTH AND EQUITY THROUGH COUNTY AND STATE NONPROFIT COALITION**

San Juan County has numerous nonprofit organizations devoted to improving health and promoting health equity. The San Juan County Partnership (SJCP) was formed in 1991 when stakeholders were awarded a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant to form a coalition to study the root causes of substance abuse and implement preventive measures. The SJCP now serves as a hub and connector for many of the county’s nonprofit organizations—providing forums for community input, strategic planning, networking, resource sharing, and prevention programming to reduce health disparities. The partnership conducts a comprehensive annual needs assessment that drives much of the health-related strategic planning in the county and publishes a youth and family resource directory to connect those in need to available services.

The SJCP coordinates the county’s Community Health Improvement Council (CHIC), which engages local citizens, service providers, and governmental entities in initiating innovative solutions to health and well-being disparities. In 2002, discussions held by the CHIC about the widespread impact of substance abuse across the county led to the formation of the Totah Behavioral Health Authority (TBHA), a collaboration using Navajo principles to address addiction and homelessness. TBHA has continued to expand since its inception, offering more intensive services and auxiliary care to individuals with the most severe forms of addiction—including those who are involved with the criminal justice system or are homeless.

San Juan County benefits from its association with the New Mexico Health Equity Partnership (NMHEP), an initiative of the Santa Fe Community Foundation with funding support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. NMHEP is composed of several core partner organizations, including the San Juan Collaborative for Health Equity, based in Shiprock, and more than 70 community organizations and members across the state. NMHEP supports several grassroots organizations in San Juan County, including Familias Unidas, the San Juan County arm of Somos el Pueblo Unido—an immigration rights group working to develop tools for policy change. NMHEP provides training in Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), an innovative policy decision-making tool supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. HIAs are designed to empower communities affected by health inequities to collect local data and develop policy recommendations to address the environmental and social factors that hinder well-being.

**ADVOCATES ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

Numerous nonprofit agencies are committed to tackling environmental degradation that is linked to worsened health outcomes among San Juan County residents. For example, Diné C.A.R.E. (Citizens Against Ruining our Environment) has a goal of protecting the Navajo homeland by empowering local individuals to act as stewards of the environment through civic involvement and oversight of environmental policy-related decision-making. San Juan Citizens Alliance, a grassroots organization dedicated to environmental justice, organizes residents to protect water, air, and public lands. Wild Earth Guardians, a nonprofit organization based in Santa Fe, focuses on protecting the natural environment and advocating for renewable energy. Several active coalitions including Greater Chaco Coalition and Frack Off Greater Chaco are dedicated to protecting sacred Navajo areas. Philanthropies, including the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation, and national environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, fund work carried out by local groups.

Other nonprofit organizations tackle environmental protection through a focus on renewable energy. Groups like Big Navajo Energy, New Energy Economy, and the Con-Alma Health Foundation, are exploring ways to reduce dependence on the fossil fuel industry by boosting the use of solar energy. Additionally, the Chamber of Commerce and San Juan College have the capacity to increase alternative employment opportunities by providing training for small businesses and startups through classes and incubator programs.

San Juan County draws visitors from all over the world because of its natural beauty and proximity to five national parks showcasing the archeology, history, and culture of American Indians. Tourism contributes significantly to the local economy, and San Juan County has capitalized on its built environment as a means for economic development. The Farmington Parks Recreation and Cultural Affairs department, the Chamber of Commerce, the Farmington Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, and small business startups are poised to assist the county in seeking alternative sources of income. Residents of San Juan County are deeply attached to the land, with a strong reverence for its natural beauty and cultural and historical richness. This reverence enhances residents’ commitment to stay put and build community.

---

**Developing a Culture of Health**

Recognizing the profound disparities in health and economic well-being across subpopulations, San Juan County is engaging a diverse group of leaders across multiple sectors to address its most pressing health-related issues. County leaders recognize that racial divides hinder the
development of community resilience and that efforts to heal are needed to become a more dynamic community that can weather economic instability and political change. Some stakeholders are making conscious efforts to foster inclusion and build trust across groups. Promising cross-sector initiatives are underway to empower disenfranchised communities, honor diverse cultural perspectives on health, and support innovative approaches to balancing economic prosperity with environmental protection.

**FOSTERING INCLUSION AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR POLICY CHANGE**

Economic and health disparities faced by American Indian and Hispanic residents in San Juan County may be related, in part, to their limited involvement in decisions about health policy and resource allocations. However, efforts are underway to change this dynamic by altering community expectations about diversity, training emerging leaders, promoting opportunities for civic engagement, and supporting grassroots organizations through capacity building. San Juan County has used several jurisdiction-specific entities, such as the Farmington Community Relations Commission, to promote needed change. The Commission was formed in 2008 after the 30-year civil rights follow-up investigation and the subsequent murders of American Indian men by white residents (including a white police officer). The Commission also was formed to address complaints by American Indians alleging discriminatory treatment during business transactions. The commission provides education and public outreach on diversity and respect, conducts cultural sensitivity training, and offers mediation services to resolve allegations of discrimination by local businesses. Members represent a diversity of race/ethnicity, age, disability, gender, and occupation. “You didn’t use to see that,” said one respondent from the health care sector, referring to the call for diversity among elected officials and corporate leadership. Another representative from the health care sector said, “…you can’t be a nonprofit in this area and not have Hispanic representation, not have Native American representation. I think that there’s an intentional awareness that you don’t want to just be the White Anglo-Saxon male.”

MOU, “the Navajo Nation and city will assist in setting standards for healthy, positive community relations dealing with cultural diversity, fairness, integrity, and respect to all people. The Navajo Nation and the city will encourage and promote mutual self-respect between all peoples through a variety of coordinated outreach and educational activities that support the mission of both organizations.”

Codifying these expectations was an important step toward a united approach to promoting health. An important sign of progress in racial healing was the September 2017 proclamation of Indigenous People’s Day to replace the Columbus Day holiday. “[The] proclamation represents another step in the right direction,” said the Shiprock Chapter President [of the Navajo Nation] who has fought for civil rights in the Farmington area for decades. The Navajo Nation president acknowledged the discussion process that resulted in the proclamation, describing the proclamation as “a recognition of a great egregious wrong that was done to the Native peoples of this western hemisphere.”

Another avenue to further racial/ethnic inclusion is the Leadership San Juan Program, a cornerstone training initiative to support emerging community leaders. Program participants are selected to represent a broad spectrum of sectors, ages, genders, and cultural groups. According to a representative of the education sector, “we try to make sure that we’re geographically diverse … as well as making sure that our Native American population is represented.” During the year-long program participants are trained by representatives of the county’s health and human services, education, business, law enforcement, media, arts and culture, and government sectors in the knowledge and skills needed to better serve the community. Trainees receive mentoring and work to increase community engagement and social connectedness within and outside of the network of program participants. Seed money has led to collaborations to promote health, including the opening of a free dental clinic for children.

Established nonprofit agencies are helping to build the capacity of grassroots organizations in disenfranchised communities. The NMHEP is funding Familias Unidas, the San Juan County arm of Somos el Pueblo Unido, an immigration rights group, to examine the effects of biased policing on the emotional, physical, and economic well-being of the Hispanic community. This project, an HIA, is designed to extend the progress made by the 2014 class action lawsuit brought by the immigration rights group that now prohibits the city police department from inquiring about immigration status or nationality. Familias Unidas, in partnership with Sexual Assault Services and Engaging Latino Communities for Education (ENLACE), is conducting a bilingual survey...
in Hispanic neighborhoods to determine to what extent fear is isolating residents from work, school, play, and use of services. The survey also seeks input on potential strategies to address the trauma experienced by families who have witnessed a loved one taken away by the police and jailed or deported. As noted by a respondent from the nonprofit sector, these policies present a community-wide health concern: “It clearly impacts the well-being of children, at an emotional level, at a financial level. All of a sudden, you lose one person. You don’t even have to experience it in your family. One of the things we [immigrants] do when we move into communities is we support and we become part of that economic structure. All of a sudden, you have people who might not start businesses, or who might lose their businesses, who might lose their homes.”

“IT [WITNESSING A LOVED ONE TAKEN TO JAIL OR DEPORTED] CLEARLY IMPACTS THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN, AT AN EMOTIONAL LEVEL, AT A FINANCIAL LEVEL. ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU LOSE ONE PERSON.”

NONPROFIT SECTOR RESPONDENT

This advocacy has led San Juan County residents to become more aware of their civil rights. For example, the Farmington police department has changed its policy to prohibit inquiry into immigration status, and has asked Somos Un Pueblo Unido to conduct a cultural competency training regarding immigration for its officers. Involvement with NMHEP and the HIA training has led to another significant achievement: the collaboration between Hispanics and American Indians who were trained in the same community empowerment tools. Prior to involvement in the HIAs, the county’s Hispanic and American Indian communities worked in isolation. During training, these communities realized that their health disparities share the common roots of discrimination and marginalization. The American Indian–Hispanic alliance has widened connections and provided additional forums for both groups to express their concerns. The alliance also resulted in Familias Unidas gaining a seat at the Mayor’s Forum for Minority Issues, increasing the visibility of health concerns of the Hispanic community.

ADDRESSING ADDICTION THROUGH MULTISECTOR, NONTRADITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Substance abuse, particularly abuse of alcohol, is one of the most pervasive and costly influences on poor health and well-being in San Juan County. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and driving under the influence have been identified by county residents and key stakeholders as top priority issues in every needs assessment conducted by the SJCP since its inception in 1996. With the consequences of addiction affecting so many, partners have begun to align and integrate substance abuse services.

The Totah Behavioral Health Authority (TBHA) exemplifies this approach. Created by a collaboration among the county government, Navajo Nation, Presbyterian Medical Services, City of Farmington, and the Farmington criminal justice system, the TBHA provides innovative services to promote recovery and address issues that commonly occur with addiction, including unemployment, housing instability, and poor physical health. TBHA uses a culturally responsive approach to treating addiction. The recovery center is guided by Navajo (Diné) principles such as Navajo k’é, which focuses on kinship. Providers refer to patients as relatives. As one staff person stated, “When I’m providing care for you, you are not a stranger coming in off the street. You are my brother. You are my sister.”

Although the TBHA serves people of all races and ethnicities, the majority are Navajo. An important element of treatment is the integration of traditional healing with Western medicine. One respondent involved with the authority noted that, “Traditional practices have been part of Totah since our inception.” In addition to sweat lodges intended for purification, TBHA offers cultural education groups, protection prayers, traditional dances, talking circles, drumming circles, and language classes. The integration of Western and traditional practices is viewed as so important to its success that TBHA’s partner, Presbyterian Medical Services, the largest provider of medical care in the county, is expanding its use of Native healing practices within hospitals across New Mexico.

TBHA’s success may also be in part a result of its nontraditional collaboration with the Farmington Police Department. Police officers are housed at TBHA and are a part of the case management team. “Our relatives [clients] actually will seek out the officers when they have questions, and so that bridge has been huge,” according to a health care sector respondent. Officers attend court to advocate for individuals receiving treatment at TBHA. The officer’s involvement increases the chance that TBHA clients will be referred for long-term substance abuse treatment rather than incarceration. This collaboration has led to systemic and sustained change within the criminal justice system, with diversion to treatment becoming increasingly popular over sentencing. The county has deemed the TBHA program so effective in reducing the costs of addiction to the criminal justice system that it pays the salary of two full-time police officers to work solely with the TBHA.

“WHEN I’M PROVIDING CARE FOR YOU, YOU ARE NOT A STRANGER COMING IN OFF THE STREET. YOU ARE MY BROTHER. YOU ARE MY SISTER.”

TOTAH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AUTHORITY STAFF PERSON

Other partnerships are seeking to address emerging issues that impair health and well-being, such as homelessness. By analyzing data from its diverse stakeholders, the multisector SJCP realized that the same group of homeless individuals repeatedly presented at the county hospital emergency room, detox center, and jail. To address this cycle, partners including the TBHA, Presbyterian Medical Services, the police, the city, housing advocates, and county commissioners developed a comprehensive treatment model for homeless individuals struggling with addiction. The Joint Intervention Program (JIP) provides full-time, intensive, behavioral health treatment integrated with wraparound
services and aftercare to assist individuals in recovery with transitional housing, job training, education, and health needs. The program offers onsite housing and a crisis-intervention center where homeless individuals under the influence of substances can be brought by police until they can be transferred to a place within the program.

When JIP began in 2016, 711 individuals took part and 1,000 people used the crisis-intervention services. Evaluation data suggest promising results, according to a respondent from the health sector: “The graduates we’ve had at the program have shown no continued contact with the legal system at all, no jail days.” Graduates have found housing and employment and have saved the county a considerable amount of money. “What we were able to track in cost savings between jail days, arrest time, detox time, was a saving to the community of $300,000 for [every group of] 10 people [who used services],” the respondent said. Additionally, in 2017, TBHA was selected as one of only 10 “Innovative Program Stars in New Mexico” by the Behavioral Health Planning Council, acting on behalf of the state's Behavioral Health Collaborative. TBHA staff credit the program’s success to collaboration, according to a representative from the health care sector. “The strongest part of the program really is the collaboration. I really think that is what makes it work.”

**“WHAT WE WERE ABLE TO TRACK IN COST SAVINGS BETWEEN JAIL DAYS, ARREST TIME, DETOX TIME, WAS A SAVING TO THE COMMUNITY OF $300,000 FOR [EVERY GROUP OF] 10 PEOPLE [WHO USED SERVICES].”**

*HEALTH SECTOR RESPONDENT*

**IMPROVING ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

A diverse multisector collaboration is advocating for environmental policies that address historic and ongoing transgressions. The SJCHE, members of the medical community, university researchers, independent advocates, and nonprofit organizations such as Diné C.A.R.E. have banded together in what has become known as the Greater Chaco Coalition to document the effects of fracking in areas around the sacred Greater Chaco Canyon. The NMHEP trained the SJCHE to conduct HIAs in July 2017, and results of three reports have been presented to the committees of the Navajo Nation Council.

These data and other testimony are being used to advocate for environmental justice: citizens have testified at Bureau of Land Management (BLM) listening sessions in Farmington, San Juan County, the EPA office in Denver, and before the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C. In September 2016, community members and leaders urged the BLM to cancel its January 2017 auction of 1,000 acres of public lands for oil and gas leasing. Testimony was emotional, with individuals expressing remorse for being persuaded by industry officials to allow drilling in exchange for recompensation, before fully understanding the effects of their decisions. One mother, through tears, said “I never thought of my grandkids. I wonder what it’s going to be like for them 20 years from now, things are already so out of hand.”

More than 150 residents, including tribal leaders, gathered in January 2017 at the BLM New Mexico office to request cancellation of the proposed lease sales around Greater Chaco pending the creation of new community protections. Although those leases were sold, advocacy groups have successfully delayed the proposed March 2018 lease sale of parcels just outside the Chaco Canyon National Historical Park until future environmental impact studies can be completed. Environmental advocates, including groups specifically formed to combat fracking, continue to work to prevent the potential sale. San Juan Citizen’s Alliance has produced a photo essay called “Faces of Chaco” to support its cause and educate the wider community about the issue.

**“I NEVER THOUGHT OF MY GRANDKIDS. I WONDER WHAT IT’S GOING TO BE LIKE FOR THEM 20 YEARS FROM NOW; THINGS ARE ALREADY SO OUT OF HAND.” [REFERRING TO AN AUCTION OF 1,000 ACRES OF PUBLIC LANDS FOR OIL AND GAS LEASING]

*MOTHER’S TESTIMONIAL AT BLM SESSION*

These advocates are partially credited for the passing of House Memorial 70 (A Memorial Re-affirming New Mexico’s Commitment to Protecting and Preserving Tribal, Cultural and Historical Sites and Resources in the Greater Chaco Canyon Landscape). The resolution in May 2017, introduced by Rep. Derrick J. Lente (D–Rio Arriba, Sandoval, and San Juan counties) requested that “the BLM and BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] desist from any leasing or issuance of permits without prior tribal consultation in the greater Chaco landscape, as designated by the BLM, until the resource management plan amendment is complete in accordance with federal law.”

**COLLABORATING TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC STABILITY AND DIVERSITY**

One of the crucial issues facing San Juan County is the changing energy landscape. With oil and gas prices dropping and environmental contamination spreading, key stakeholders are realizing the need for economic diversification. Nontraditional partnerships are exploring innovative means to broaden employment beyond the traditional energy sector. The Chamber of Commerce; the City of Farmington’s Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department; and the Farmington Metropolitan Planning Organization are striving to create more jobs by capitalizing on the temperate climate and proximity to fishing, river trails, off-road biking, and national parks. Consistent with the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department 2014 master plan, their goal is to invest in the recreation sector and brand San Juan County as a place where outdoor lovers thrive, expanding tourism, and offering healthy, outdoor options for residents, including hiking, biking, and water sports. They are extending and connecting Farmington’s trail system, adding paddle trails for tubing and rafting, and expanding the park system through a recent purchase of 120 acres of river frontage. Additionally, the Four Corners Economic Development organization and the University of New Mexico are considering a plan to diversify the economy by turning abandoned industrial lots and buildings into...
Addressing Lack of Health Coverage Through Multiple Efforts

Lack of insurance is a major barrier to health care utilization. Local hospitals and federally qualified health centers provide insurance navigators to assist those unaware of Medicaid coverage or with language or other barriers to enrollment. For those not eligible for Medicaid or who otherwise cannot pay health care bills, San Juan County offers the Health Care Assistance Program (HCAP), which is funded by a portion of gross tax receipts on local businesses. In addition, San Juan County contributes approximately $3 million to the state’s safety-net care pool, which New Mexico counties are required to support through a portion of gross tax receipts on local businesses. Agencies in Farmington and other parts of the county are beginning to integrate Navajo cultural practices. The Presbyterian Medical System is considering the use of solar heating systems in housing and nonresidential buildings. Navajo environmental advocates are exploring ways to use the current power grid for solar expansion, and Big Navajo Energy, a 100 percent Navajo-owned renewable energy company, is offering solar and wind-based power systems to provide electricity to families in remote areas that have been without power.

Summary of County’s Efforts to Build a Culture of Health

Based on the Culture of Health Framework used to guide Sentinel Community data collection and monitoring in San Juan County, progress toward creating a Culture of Health is evident in several areas. Agencies and advocates in San Juan County have shown a commitment to Making Health a Shared Value by empowering historically marginalized populations, ensuring diversity across community boards and leadership programs, celebrating diversity, and training marginalized communities in the use of tools to combat unjust environmental practices and civil rights violations. San Juan County has engaged in Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration, as evidenced by the TBHA—an innovative partnership of government, health, and nonprofit organizations combatting addiction, crime, and homelessness. Innovators in the community are seeking ways to move the county away from its historical dependence on extraction industries toward cleaner energy production and economic development that fosters modification of the built environment. Investments in solar energy, transportation, park systems, and outdoor recreation are Creating a Healthier, More Indigenous and Holistic Approaches to Well-being.

a A hogan is a traditional Navajo hut of logs and earth.
**FACILITATORS TO A CULTURE OF HEALTH**

**Shared love of the land motivates collaborative efforts.** Despite the different experiences in health, well-being, and economic security among racial and ethnic groups, a shared reverence for the land has built strong bridges between communities and facilitates collaboration and commitment.

**Willingness to face historical racial divisions and trauma.** Many respondents spoke about the need for racial healing. The openness to dialogue, by leaders from both historically powerful and marginalized communities, suggests that there is hope for Making Health a Shared Value.

**Positive informal relationships and a history of collaboration.** The relatively small size of the community and many opportunities for informal personal interaction create strong relationships and incentive for collaboration among residents and agency representatives. As one respondent from the health care sector said, “You’ve got the three cities, Aztec, Bloomfield, Farmington and the county, a lot of collaboration, a lot of interdependence, a lot of sharing programs, sharing resources, a lot of that happening in everyday life. You may work in Farmington, but you live in Aztec. Your kids are playing baseball in Aztec, but you’re coming to Farmington to do your grocery shopping. That is very common here.”

---

**BARRIERS TO A CULTURE OF HEALTH**

**A history of racism and segregation.** Navajo residents in particular have been oppressed, and many have felt unvalued and demoralized and therefore, isolated from the institutions that make decisions affecting the health and well-being of county residents. Although Navajo engagement in county-wide programming is increasing, many Navajo residents are hesitant to engage.

**Overreliance on energy industry creates economic dependence.** The county’s dependence on fossil fuel, along with variations in the prices of these commodities, causes ripple effects throughout the economy. Likewise, the dependence on coal extraction and coal-fired power plants, which are being phased out, results in loss of jobs and reduced spending capacity. The energy industry has not developed the capacity to transition to alternative energy, and some powerful stakeholders have been resistant to diversification efforts.

**Poor infrastructure and geographic isolation.** Poor transportation infrastructure, particularly on the Navajo Nation, creates hardship for residents who cannot easily access health care and other types of services.

**Fear inhibits community engagement.** Although there have been successes in reducing racism, such as the successful class action lawsuit brought by the Hispanic community and their allies, many members of the Hispanic population are still fearful of racial profiling. This fear leads residents to disengage from community institutions, such as schools and jobs, diminishing social connectedness and feelings of unity. Fear of questions about legal status and lack of financial resources and health insurance also keep some of the Hispanic population from using health care. Moreover, some Hispanic residents are afraid to ask for help in times of emergency because of targeted detention practices that could result in families being separated. As one respondent from the nonprofit sector said, “You go into shock, and you kind of tend to stay at home. They [members of the Hispanic community] weren’t taking their children to school; they weren’t participating in the local community as they should have, as they were used to.”

---

**Equitable Community.** The community is beginning to address financial, transportation, and cultural/linguistic barriers to health care, although stronger linkages across sectors and between governmental entities are needed. Finally, Strengthening the Integration of Health Services and Systems is an emerging interest and key stakeholders are becoming more aware of the need for more seamless and accessible care.

San Juan County is working to overcome its history of racial oppression by fostering programs, policies, and norms that promote a shared Culture of Health. Addressing differences in the socioeconomic conditions that facilitate or inhibit health requires a long-term vision and commitment. Respondents from a variety of sectors and backgrounds report that the county is beginning to grapple with the necessary, but difficult conversations around race and power, conversations that have historically been absent in San Juan County. Marginalized groups are taking advantage of opportunities to share their perspectives and advocate for their rights and are benefitting from capacity building and funding from statewide and local nonprofit agencies. Cultural competence and respect for the indigenous perspective are gaining ground.

Addressing some of the county’s health challenges, such as lack of access to health care among the Navajo and Hispanic populations, will require the investment of significant resources and collaboration. Geographic isolation, accompanied by poor transportation infrastructure, especially on the Navajo Nation, is a serious obstacle to accessing health care. Current efforts to resolve the transportation barrier occur in siloes and are insufficient to meet the needs of the population. However, county leaders are cognizant of the need to forge alliances to tackle these issues. Efforts to prevent further environmental pollution, reduce environmental disparities, and diversify the economy are hindered by resistance to change among those who wield power. However small, collaborative efforts are taking place to promote renewable energy and economic diversification.

The impact of San Juan County’s efforts to create a Culture of Health will depend on the extent to which it will address its history of discrimination and inequity and face the realities of the changing fossil fuel industry. Trends to monitor will include how empowerment tools, such as the HIAs, influence policy decisions, especially around environmental protection and immigrant rights. It also will be important to examine whether efforts to diversify influential policy boards and leadership roles are sustained and if anti-discrimination efforts and commitments between the Navajo Nation and the City of Farmington (such as the MOU) to work together more harmoniously are effective.
Cultural connectors passionate about racial healing are finding an openness to discussing and redressing historical trauma, and innovators are beginning to embrace indigenous perspectives for healing and uniting. The extent to which these efforts increase collaborations, promote health equity, and enrich San Juan County’s multicultural assets will be important to monitor. Key to the county’s future is how organizations and residents address economic diversification and environmental protection. Energy and other economic innovations could bring opportunities for a thriving future, but failure to innovate could result in further environmental degradation and economic and population losses. On the other hand, rapid withdrawal from the fossil fuel industry could harm many relying on this sector for employment. Exploring how San Juan County handles this delicate balance could provide important lessons for other counties facing changing industrial and manufacturing landscapes. Further, the partnerships established to seek environmental justice could expand and strengthen, propelling progress in social justice and other forms of inequity. Another crucial issue to monitor is the county’s treatment of immigrants. Policing and deportation policies could result in a vibrant portion of the population being relegated to the shadows—afraid to work, go to school, build businesses, and create social connectedness. Ensuring that all residents can flourish and contribute to their fullest potential is paramount to the well-being of San Juan County.
References


