

As southwestern states begin to reopen

## Navajo Nation COVID-19 cases rise while emergency federal aid remains delayed

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2 May 2020

Native American tribes are being starved of federal aid more than a month after the Coronavirus Aid, Recovery and Economic Security (CARES) Act was signed into law even as COVID-19 infection rates on tribal lands across the United States are continuing to rise. On a per capita basis the outbreak among the Navajo Nation across the US Southwest is almost as severe those of New York and New Jersey.

The CARES Act, the largest stimulus package in American history with about \$2.5 trillion set for allocation, will act as a slush fund for the country's corporate and financial aristocracy to continue to loot the working class to prop up Wall Street. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, the “wolves guarding the hen house” will oversee a vast transfer of wealth to the ruling class, eclipsing that of the 2008 bailout.

Of the \$2.5 trillion, tribal governments around the country were allocated \$8 billion in “direct emergency relief funds.” Tribal governments have sued the US Treasury Department over the inclusion of corporations under the definition of “Indian Tribe” in the CARES act, worrying that corporations will receive disproportionate aid. The corporations in question are Alaska Native corporations, which own most of the native land in Alaska, controlling employment, land management and building, including the building of health facilities.

This week, a US district judge ruled in favor of federally recognized tribes and against Alaska Native corporations, but the Treasury Department has not begun to disburse payments to tribes and, according to the *Huffington Post*, has refused to comment on the delay.

Reflecting the political infighting wracking the US

ruling class, House Democrats on Wednesday issued a letter to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Interior Secretary David Bernhardt requesting a distribution of the funds, citing the “negative impact that every day of delay has on Tribes.” The \$8 billion which the tribes are seeking to get disbursed—which will be monopolized by a narrow wealthy elite layer of tribal leaders—is a pittance compared to the trillions doled out to Wall Street, and the weeks of delay have cost untold lives.

In fact, the conditions of deep impoverishment and a lack of critical infrastructure imposed on Native Americans by the federal government have contributed to some of the worst coronavirus infection rates in the country. Native American tribes continue to face a crisis of overcrowded hospitals, with entire families infected with COVID-19.

The Navajo Nation, which covers 17.5 million acres of territory across Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, tops 2,141 cases of COVID-19 and 71 deaths as of May 1, according to the *Navajo Times*. These cases likely under-represent the true number of cases throughout Navajo Nation, as just over 12,000 tests have been administered to a population of over 300,000 spread over an area the size of West Virginia.

COVID-19 infection rates on Navajo Nation are among the highest in the Southwest. In Arizona, while Phoenix's Maricopa county has 93.4 cases per 100,000 people, counties on Navajo land have cases as high as 655 per 100,000 people. In New Mexico, where Santa Fe County has 67.2 cases per 100,000, McKinley County, a population center for Navajo and Zuni Pueblo peoples, has 1409 cases per 100,000 people.

Meanwhile in Utah, as multimillion-dollar F-35 jets

flew over the state on Wednesday ostensibly to honor health care workers, Salt Lake County reached 217.5 cases per 100,000 people, and the rural San Juan county, bordering Monument Valley, reached 301 cases per 100,000 people.

As states in the Southwest continue to reopen state and national parks, many of which sit on tribal land, tourism will again bring new cases to already overwhelmed rural areas.

Writing for the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Heather Kovich, a medical professional working on the Navajo Nation in northwest New Mexico, characterized the situation in tribal hospitals as a deepening crisis: “A month ago, our first cases alarmed us; a week ago, our hospital was at surge level three: a series of tarps separated our Covid ward from the rest of the hospital. Now we are at level five: the whole hospital is essentially the Covid ward. At level six, we may expand to a school gymnasium.”

The pandemic, which spreads mainly among families under the same roof, has decimated generations of Native Americans who live in high-density housing with multiple generations under the same roof. Kovich explained:

“The virus landed in the middle of the reservation and exploded outward, from a remote region with an emergency department but no hospital. Many patients were transferred 100 miles east to our facility, but others were sent equally far in the opposite direction. Some were transported south to Albuquerque or Phoenix. Over the ensuing weeks, these families have had sick and dead members spread along an 800-mile circuit. Family members who are healthy enough are trying to coordinate hospital discharges, home oxygen delivery, transport of bodies, and memorials, all while grieving the loss of multiple relatives, young and old. The impact of this collective trauma is hard to grasp.”

The Navajo Nation, and Native American tribes across the country, have the highest rates of poverty and malnutrition in the US, leading to an endemic health crisis that has left these communities vulnerable to pandemics like coronavirus. This federally enforced generational poverty is the result of US imperialism’s centuries long mission to exterminate and then assimilate Native Americans.

The coronavirus pandemic—and the malign negligence of the ruling class—are global phenomena, decimating

vulnerable Native American communities across North America and indigenous populations around the world.

Last week, the Oglala Sioux Tribe president issued a letter petitioning South Dakota’s governor, who proposed that 70 percent of South Dakota’s population would be infected, to impose a stay-at-home order and suspend construction of the Keystone XL pipeline to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to tribal lands.

In Canada, the Gull Bay First Nation in northwest Ontario is attempting to fight an outbreak of coronavirus after six people tested positive with COVID-19. That country’s territory of Nunavut, which is majority Inuit, recorded its first case of the disease Thursday in the remote community of Pond Inlet.

In Peru’s Amazon, indigenous tribes have accused the government of “ethnocide by inaction” in a formal complaint to the United Nations. In Brazil last month, a 15-year-old boy from the remote Yanomami tribe died of COVID-19; he had no known contact with a coronavirus carrier, indicating the possibility of community spread.



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