



# MEETING IN A BOX: Native American Heritage Month



In November, we celebrate the culture of the diverse communities in North America who identify as Native American and Alaska Native as part of Native American Heritage Month.

This Meeting in a Box is a valuable tool to share with employees as part of your organization's professional development and cultural competence educational resources. This month, we will highlight the contributions of the Indigenous community in the U.S. and the working world, as well as its people's resilience, history and vibrant cultures.



## COVID-19 and the Future of Native Languages

Before the first documented case of COVID-19 in the U.S. made national headlines, Native American tribes faced a difficult battle to keep their languages and cultures alive.

Of the estimated 300 Native languages once spoken across what is now the United States, only 167 are still spoken — and in many cases by predominantly older members of the tribes. Navajo, the most widely spoken Native American language today with roughly 170,000 speakers, doesn't make it into the list of 25 most commonly spoken languages in the United States.

When Congress passed the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act in 2006, it set aside an annual budget of \$12 million for tribes working toward preserving their languages.

While that is good, it's far from enough to cover what tribes around the country need in their quest to hang on to their heritage. The amount is also a drop in a bucket compared to what the American government has historically spent to eradicate tribal autonomy, education and culture.

For a population segment that has spent the last few hundred years experiencing a great deal of uncertainty about what lies ahead, COVID-19 added yet another threat to their cultural future and their health and wellbeing.

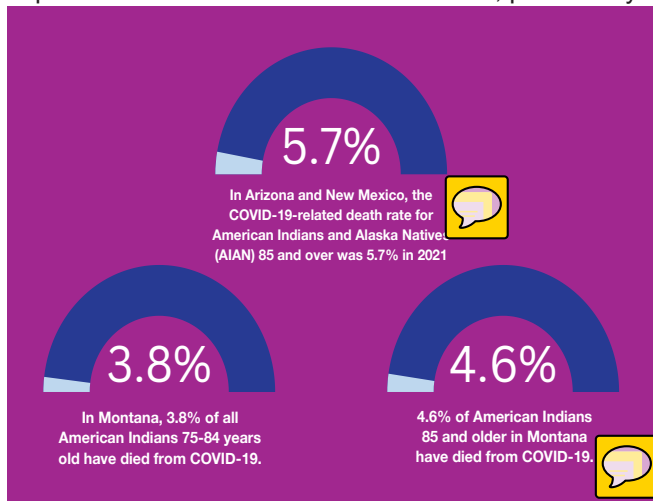


## The COVID-19 Effect

As COVID-19 ravaged communities across the world, few have been impacted quite like the Native American community. The population numbers are already so small that a loss of just 1% could be devastating. For example, the Northern Cheyenne tribe in Montana lost around 50 members in February 2021 — a significant number for a group with a population of 5,000. In proportion to the overall population of the United States, this figure would be the equivalent of losing 3 million Americans to the virus.

Given the dangers of the virus for people over the age of 65, there is also the double impact of wiping out tribe members who are the storytellers, cultural authorities and the most fluent in Native American languages.

According to the Brookings Institute, three disturbing trends have emerged that will have devastating impacts on Native American communities, particularly



In other words, AIAN people are dying of COVID-19 at a rate similar to white people who are 30 years older than them. As COVID-19 cases continue to ebb and flow across the country, the risk to AIAN cultures is significant.

In February 2021, The Guardian reported that 1 in every 475 Native Americans had died from COVID-19 since the pandemic started. In comparison, 1 in every 825 white Americans and 1 in every 645 Black Americans met the same fate. No community may face a more dire fallout from the pandemic-related deaths in the years to come.

## What Can Be Done to Save Native Languages?

The timeline for saving Native languages is quickly approaching its end. The assimilation of Native peoples has been a long, ongoing process that cannot be undone in a single generation, never mind a legislative session.

A more significant state response with additional resources and support for Native communities is necessary but will not be enough to address this existential struggle on its own.

As The New Republic noted in 2019, “many of these languages are not even a full lifetime away from disappearing. They exist for as long as the heart of the elder who carries the words continues to beat.”

Access to medical services and vaccination rates among Native populations is helping. Improving the overall quality of data reported around COVID-19 infections and vaccinations by race, ethnicity and gender would provide better insight into the prioritization and urgency of resources.

Although there is a pervading narrative of vaccine hesitancy amongst many communities of color, that simply isn't the case with Native communities.

A study published by the Urban Indian Health Institute indicated that 75% of Native Americans were willing to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, compared to just 56% of the broader U.S. population at that time. Despite this, roughly 45% of the Native American population in the U.S. remains unvaccinated.

Many states failed to report the racial makeup of people being vaccinated, but even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) could not do so until May 2021, more than a year after the pandemic began. The lack of reliable data makes evidence-based changes to policies a challenge and public exposure of health disparities difficult to illustrate.

For Native American populations, the task of saving their culture can appear insurmountable. Community support and engagement from non-native groups around issues that threaten these cultures are direly needed. As you engage employees for Native American Heritage Month, consider the ways your company and the broader community can support the local tribes in your area.



# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



How can non-Native American populations support the teaching and spread of Native American languages?



Do you think Native American representation and narratives in media and politics is representative of that population?



What are some ways businesses can better support Native American communities during COVID-19?