

Native Women: Making a Difference in Montana

Hearing from Native women that they know and trust—and who may be cancer survivors themselves—is helping to convince more Native women to keep their doctor appointments, and that may be helping them live longer.

What's the best way to encourage a Native woman to get her yearly women's health screening?

Ask another Native woman to lead the way.

That's what is happening with tribal and state breast and cervical health programs, Indian Health Service and non-profit organizations across the United States. In places like Montana, North Dakota, Arizona, Oklahoma, Kansas and other states, respected Native women are taking a leading role in educating others in their communities about the value of health screenings.

Native women professionals and volunteers are also talking to non-tribal health administrators about understanding health issues or cultural considerations on their reservations or in the cities with high numbers of Indian people. They help develop and conduct surveys to get some answers about why a Native woman might not get her annual exam. On the surveys and in interviews many women indicated that,

- ❖ clinics with mammogram units are often too far away
- ❖ transportation or gas is not always available
- ❖ there is still fear that cancer is an automatic death sentence
- ❖ no one they trust has ever talked to them directly about why getting screened for breast and cervical cancer is so important.*

Connecting in Montana

With help from strong Native women, things are beginning to change. For instance, in Montana, a group of twenty-five American Indian women act as an advisory council to the Montana Breast and Cervical Health Program (MBCHP)—a program that offers free mammogram screening and Pap tests to eligible women across the state. The group of women are called the Montana American Indian Women's Health Coalition (MAIWHC). They

represent women from all seven reservations and five major cities. They are American Indian nurses, educators, artists, elder community members and others. Since 2001 their strong voices have joined many others from health organizations across the state to make health care more accessible to Indian women.

Alma Know His Gun McCormick, (Crow) for instance, is part of the MAIWHC group, and is also the Project Director for Messengers for Health program on the Crow Reservation. That organization is made possible by a partnership between the Montana State University and members of the Crow Tribe, through a grant from the American Cancer Society. Its purpose is to organize Native women leaders to talk about cervical cancer with their friends, family and other members in their communities.

And it's not all talk. As partners with the state's Montana Breast and Cervical Health Program (MBCHP), "Messengers" make actual clinic appointments for the women. And they help fill out enrollment and eligibility paperwork for the MBCHP to see if they can get free health screenings.

"Many of the volunteers do this because they have a personal experience with cancer, or had a family member with cancer," Beldine Crooked Arm-Pease says. Beldine, a Crow woman from Lodgegrass, Montana, is the Assistant Project Coordinator for Messengers, and also part of the MAIWHC group. She too, has had personal experience with cancer—in two ways.

In the first way, Beldine's grandmother died from breast cancer. "I didn't know her but my dad became an orphan at a very early age because of her cancer."

The second way Beldine knows about cancer is that she had cervical cancer herself. It was detected early enough

** Cancer screening is important because 1) if there is no cancer then there is peace of mind, and 2) if there is cancer, it can be treated earlier and the chances of surviving are much greater.*

to save her life—though she had a complete hysterectomy. She did not need radiation or chemotherapy.

Beldine's dedication has helped save lives. For instance, she encouraged her sister to make an appointment for her woman's annual exam, and cervical cancer was detected. "The cancer was caught early. It didn't spread. Now it is 100 percent gone!"

"I'm glad I did push a little to get her appointment at first," Beldine says. "When it came time to go to the hospital for the surgery, we were hand in hand."

The MBCHP hired an American Indian woman, Kassie Runsabove, (Gros Ventre) at Riverstone Health in Billings, to help with free screening services for women like Beldine's sister, and others, like Carol Whiteman, also a Crow woman, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007. (See Carol's story on page 4.)

"As an American Indian woman, Kassie connected [the state program] with the women at Crow and Northern Cheyenne," says Molly Hale, Program Manager




Beldine Crooked Arm-Pease (Crow), listens thoughtfully to another Native woman at a cancer education conference in Salt Lake City.

for the MBCHP, at Riverstone Health near Billings.

"For the state's part, we made a point to show up [at the reservations] so the women could see who we are, get to know the program, and see our commitment." Molly says. "Together we have built a trusting relationship. It has been an amazing link."

As for Northern Cheyenne women, they have benefitted greatly from the efforts of Rosella Pongah (Northern Cheyenne). Rosella is a Community Health Representative for the Northern Cheyenne Tribe's cancer program. She helps provide transportation to clinics for exams and testing for Northern Cheyenne women recruited by the state program—as well as transportation to cancer treatment.

The "Pink Ribbon Bingo" events that MBCHP sponsors are great examples of how well the partnerships are working: Indian Health Service sends out notices from their mailing lists to Crow and Northern Cheyenne addresses; the Messengers let women know by word-of-mouth; the Tribes and businesses donate door prizes; and staff from the Montana Breast and Cervical Health Program give educational presentations. Molly says that the response to the events have been great. "For our first event we hoped for 100 women, and 170 showed up."

The partnership helps everyone involved. The Messengers help the state enroll women they might not have reached, but the state follows up on the paper work. "And if I can't get a hold of someone," Molly says, "then Alma or Rosella will say, 'That's okay. I'll give her a call, or stop by and see how things are.'" 



PARTNERS FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH IN MONTANA INCLUDE:

- ❖ The state of Montana Breast and Cervical Health Program (MBCHP)
- ❖ Messengers for Health, and Montana State University
- ❖ Montana American Indian Women's Health Coalition (MAIWHC)
- ❖ Non-profits organizations like the American Cancer Society, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, and Avon Breast Care Foundation
- ❖ Native and non-Native professionals and volunteers

There are over 900 state-contracted providers including

- ❖ Hospitals such as Big Horn County Memorial
- ❖ All seven Montana Tribes, including tribal health clinics
- ❖ Indian Health Service hospitals/clinics
- ❖ Private doctor offices, etc.