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Sun, 4/11 1:29PM • 22:31

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

people, communities, food, janine, government, households, organizing, donations, called, navajo nation, deal, navajo, support, spread, resourced, work, type, families, infections, united states

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indigenous rights radio, because knowledge is power.

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At the time of recording this radio program, the United States has recorded the highest number of COVID-19 infections, as well as vitality is on my fifth 2020 stats reveal that the US is on 1.2 million infections and just under 70,000 deaths of the indigenous peoples in the States. Reports are indicating that the Navajo Nation I hit really hard. And in this program, we get a first hand account. We got a chance to speak to Janine yahzee.

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All right. Well, my name is Janine yahzee. And I'm of the dinar nation, also known as the Navajo nation in the southwest United States. I work with international Indian treaty council as the Sustainable Development Coordinator. And as part of my work with aitc. I am the CO convener of the indigenous peoples major group for sustainable development.

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Thank you so much for joining us, Janine. Now, Janine, I have read about the high numbers of infections and fatalities in the big cities. But I've also seen that places where the Navajo people reside, are also listed among the areas with higher rates of infections. Can you comment on this, please?

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Yes, for the past three weeks, our Navajo Nation, even though we only have approximately 175,000 people living on our reservation, almost half of our population lives in urban areas, we still are seeing a higher rate of spread of covid 19 among our communities, and it's at rates comparable to what's happening in New York and New Jersey. And so a lot we've been getting a lot of questions about this. But the the volunteer group that I work for is an all volunteer grassroots group called Navajo Hopi COVID. relief. And we work with the Hopi, because they're another sovereign nation that is completely surrounded by our nation. And this is the time when we really need to rise up and show solidarity. But we've been preparing for COVID-19 to hit our communities because we knew it would be bad, both because of the lack of access to health care, the lack of critical community infrastructure such as paved roads, water, utilities, electricity, and even just a set of facilities that provide community services across our region. We knew that because of the digital divide, that there would be it would be hard to get accurate and timely information to people about how to deal with this. And we also knew that the federal response or the lack thereof, of prior to COVID, coming down to the southwest, was also going to cause a lot of confusion, because it was misleading people about the severity of the threat that we were facing. And so we started organizing before the first COVID case was detected on our nation. But it came in and immediately created a hotspot because it was brought in by a non native pastor who was holding church services that brought community members from different communities together in a service of 150. And I think one of them was also 250 people that have been back to back and two different communities. And so because that pastor was sick, he infected the majority of the church goers and those churchgoers then went back to their families, their households, their communities, and and the way that our households are their multi generational households, and so there's often there can be up to 10 to 15 people living under one roof and you know, our families, we live with our elders, we take care of the grandkids. And so when just that one event is what allowed this to really spark and start spreading like wildfire fire. There was a two week period as well where we didn't have testing at all on our reservation. So our reservation is the size of Connecticut, Wisconsin and New Hampshire combined. And we only have eight health care facility. Serving that entire area. And so when the first cases started happening, you could see and we could already detect, even though it was in a community called Chichen Bhutto, which was really real, rural and isolated,

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on order to get

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health care, the family then has to travel from that place to the nearest health care facility. And of course, you have to stop you have to get gas, you have to get like water, snacks, whatever, maybe some medicine because you know, you're going to be waiting at the hospital for a while. And so after the first person went to the to, which was Tuba City, Regional Health Care Center, and they were told they didn't have tests there, they were held there for a little while before they were then transported to a city that was six hours away, in order to get tested. And so all along that path, you also saw cases start to sprout up. And so it was just like, you know, it was just the opportune conditions for this virus to spread and to keep spreading before we had the protective personal protective equipment available before we had testing available. And all of the issues that existed prior to COVID. Getting here just allowed it to to spread like wildfire.

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Today in listening to you talk about the digital divide and unpaved roads, I can totally relate being from South Africa. But because of these infrastructure issues, we're getting support from government in terms of food packages, welfare grants, and that sort of thing. Janine, can you tell us about the support that you are getting? Are you getting any help from government agencies?

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Yes, they are to a certain extent. But it's really important for us to understand because there are going to be a lot of similarities with what our brothers and sisters are going, are dealing with are going to deal with, and other so called underdeveloped countries. Even though we're in the United States, our communities very much are in an underdeveloped status, quote, unquote. And so we that was a large reason why we self organized prior to it coming to our communities. Not only did we understand that there were going to be particular vulnerabilities, unique vulnerabilities that made our people more at risk. But that also the impact that it was having on the economy was also going to disproportionately impact our people who are mostly wage laborers are laborers that work in seasonal our contractual jobs. Workers in the service industry, maids for hotels, and so we already were dealing with high unemployment rates. And we have what we, one of our researchers, Dr. Maroney banali has called the gray economy, which is where people make a lot of their money. selling food on the roadside are making crafts are making things and selling them at big flea markets where like they're they're basically like open markets where people come and gather by the hundreds on a regular like weekly basis. And so we knew all of that was going to radically shift and that we were going to see a level of poverty and unemployment that we've never seen before, even if we're able to control and protect our population from the worst impacts of the virus spread. And so as a part of that work, we were trying to work early on with County, with tribal government and with state government, because we're NGO, we're an or non government organization. But what's really worked for us is not a formal partnership with those governments, agencies, but rather a really informal collaboration with elected leaders with people in the philanthropy field, people in the education field people who work at our detention centers at our rehab centers, people who work in home care services, people who work in the medical field. And through that way, we were able to bring a lot of the expertise that was necessary to the table to then address and look at and evaluate what were the gaps that an NGO could best fulfill. Knowing that on the government side, there was going to be a lot of bureaucratic red tape and a lot of hold up between that was going to prevent direct access to the so called aid or the stimulus bill funding that was allocated for tribal nations. For example,

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and also just like the different politics that were playing out, we knew we're going to create unnecessary barriers to actually getting government assistance. And but we also felt it was important to stay on top of what those were and what the progress was. So that we could be most agile in responding to the direct needs of our community members, and be flexible enough to address the gaps of anything that was going to be provided. So that we could ensure our most vulnerable were taken care of, and that no one falls through the cracks. And as a result of that, we work with some government agencies better than others. With some governments like for example, we have, we have a non existing relationship with the federal government, or any federal agencies. But we have a good working relationship with, with our state government in the state of New Mexico, some of our county officials, and now we're working on building a better relationship with our tribal government, who was severely understaffed and under resourced at the beginning of this pandemic. And so now they're just kind of getting organized and in a place where we can really start to collaborate together. But that's why it was so important for us to organize ahead of time and why one of our major messages to people, especially to communities, that suffer the same systemic barriers as us Do not wait for government to get their get their stuff together, to to help our communities, we really have to meet this head on. We have to prepare ourselves, educate ourselves, and build the partnerships and the collaborations that we know are going to best serve our people. Because the government's are not getting their acts together quick enough to be able to protect our most vulnerable the people we find important,

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what we're seeing as the biggest media at home, Janine is definitely food. Would you say that food is a need over there, too?

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Yes, absolutely. Food was the primary concern. Because before the disruption to our informal economy, or a great economy, people were already struggling to survive and to access food. I earlier mentioned that we had eight health care centers servicing our entire nation, we also only have 13 grocery stores. And so we are already dealing with some issues regarding lack of access to food. So we knew that people were not going to be prepared or have the ability either financially are in access to a grocery store, to stock up on two weeks, three weeks worth of food, in order to comply with the social distancing, and self isolation rules that were going to protect them. And so when we started off at first, and we also know that welfare programs aren't really structured for the health and well being of our peoples, right, the way our welfare programs work, they, they

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they'll give people like a little bit of assistance to access food, but it's highly processed, high fat, high carbohydrates type of food. And we didn't want that either. So what we did was we organized fairly early, to identify ways to get to break through the middlemen to stop working through the grocery stores and go directly to large suppliers and distributors to order food and bulk and have it delivered to different parts of our reservation where our volunteers were trained and health and safety protocols. And were outfitted and full PP, to then sort that into food boxes that we could provide to households to support the entire household for up to two weeks. And so it was it was drought drastically different from anything we've ever done before any type of organizing any type of aid, because of the health aspect of this and how careful you have to be not to transmit the virus, the type of information you need in order to support the whole household. All of this stuff was was really different from the way anyone was used to operating or organizing. But that's been our primary focus is like how do we do this in a way that provides well balanced food, enough for a whole household enough for households that are intergenerational, that have pre existing conditions and may have different dietary needs. Some households that have electricity and running water, some that don't, some only have one or the other. And so it's an extraordinary effort to really look at the unique needs of each family in each given area. In order to provide them what is going to be fair, just equitable and sufficient enough to last them for two weeks and then checking back in with them to see how how, how they're doing and if everything's okay. Now, as we're as we're really develop that model for how to do that, we're now looking at how do we then compensate and invest in local farmers and ranchers and livestock owners through the donations that we're receiving, so that we're buying directly from the small producers, therefore, replacing the income that they lost from other revenue streams and open markets, the closure of open markets, while ensuring that people have access to locally grown healthy, traditional foods. And so we're going to be shifting our model more and more as this progresses, to really look at not only providing the aid that will keep the household safe, but starting to support us the beginnings of a continental economy that promotes local resiliency, that promotes local production and, and self sustainability within each region. They especially now that we are in planting season. And so we have different groups that are organizing themselves to begin to look at different aspects of that. What would it look like if we were to pay our volunteers to go through the training and be able to do this work so that at least our households are getting a little bit of income during this time? What does it look like to pay farmers for access to seeds, and then redistributing that to other people and paying them to grow it to as to start these gardens? And how can we keep building that model and make it robust enough so that when we do because we anticipate this when we do see the shortage in the food supply nationally, that we're already building and creating a localized food system that can help support the loss of some of those some of those food supply chains.

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So yeah, that's kind of like what's been the advantage of organizing outside of government is that we can be flexible and keep changing as the circumstances and as the needs are changing on the ground. Because we do find like in this process that other needs are feminine hygiene products, soap, shampoo, laundry, laundry soap, so that people can wash their handmade facemask at home or they can wash their clothes at home and don't have to go drive to the nearest town in order to do that. So the all of these other things are coming up that we didn't quite anticipate diapers and formula for, for infants, but also diapers for elderly who have bladder issues. These are all things that would cause a person to go travel hours to go to the nearest city in order to buy these things because they're not available anywhere to them locally, we're now increasing our supply chain to be able to also address those needs.

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For someone who is listening now who might be thinking about helping tell us about the kind of support that is needed.

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Yes, we have a website called Navajo Hopi solidarity.org, I'm sending you the address right now. And that in there has a lot of information on kind of the work that we're doing. It also has links to our GoFundMe. And I really strongly encourage any community that is going to be self organizing to do this work, please ask for cash donations. It's more helpful and more useful when the people who are being impacted can use that money in ways that make most sense to them. It's great that people want to send donations in terms of like in the form of food are our other supplies, and clothes, but at the end of the day, like but it takes a lot more work and energy to sort through those types of donations and then figure out where to send them and some of them aren't even needed or necessary, so that it just takes up space or ends up taking up more more effort to get rid of those things that aren't needed. That would really encourage people to just send cash. We do accept donations in terms of peepee and diapers, our pads and tampons for a woman. But that's because that we can distribute just based on on how much we get. But when we get other donations, we weren't getting other donations for a while. People were sending us old books, for example, are there we're sending us like a mishmash of different types of food that were really unique. And it's not enough to equitably distribute among different families are they were like really unique, like foods that our people don't really eat. So it became much more, much harder and labor intensive to be getting to sort those types of donations. And I think this is something we've learned through different types of disasters, widespread disasters is that if you really want to help communities that are impacted, you have to give them cash, because they know on the ground, how best to use those resources, and to make it most effective to get to the most the greater amount of people, especially when a disaster has an impact on the local economy. This, you know, the fact that we're getting all of these cash donations is what allows us right now to have this conversation about buying directly from impacted farmers to then provide the food that go out to these families are investing in growing gardens as a long term strategy for how to deal with the food scarcity issues. If we didn't have donations of cash, we wouldn't be able to do that. And it would have put us in a in an even worse position. If we were just dependent on food coming in, in terms of donations. Because we know we were already seeing it, we're know these food supply lines are being weakened. And a lot of them are drying up because of just with how this virus is spreading across the United States and the at large agricultural areas that were so use independent and dependent upon getting our produce from

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Lastly, do you have some sort of crowdfunding setup? And if so, how can we reach you?

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Well, we need that we need to build something better. We need to build something better. If anything, we're learning from this. It's that we deserve more, and we got to build into better resilient economies

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and communities.

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Thank you so much for talking to us. Janine has he is from the donee nation and works as the Sustainable Development Coordinator for the International Indian treaty Council. For more on the Rights of Indigenous peoples visit ceus.org and follow cultural survival on Facebook and Twitter.