



An emerging program designed to engage Natives who are entering adulthood is entering its second year.

The “Health Policy Fellowship for Native Youth” immerses participants in health-related discussion and policy solutions during its year-long progression.

The National Indian Health Board is taking applications for its next class through March 30.

Fellows work with Tribal leaders, policy specialists and public health experts to become health policy advocates who identify and help solve problems related to Indian health through policy solutions.

The program sets many goals for its fellows and they are expected to learn a significant amount of material over the course of the year.

Applicants must be enrolled in a federally recognized Indian Tribe and be between 18 and 24 years old. Potential fellows should also have an interest in Indian health policy or health care and be able to engage with their Tribal leaders, officials said.

“We need more Native Congresswomen and men, health advocates, and warriors in suites at our federal agencies who open up the doors for Tribal leaders to share their Peoples’ voices,” said NIHB’s Native Youth Engagement Manager Dr. Wendee Gardner (Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians).

“We know that Native youth are involved in the political tides shaping Indian Country. Just look at social media and you will see Native youth getting involved in their communities through their youth councils, advocating for our environment and sacred spaces, and participating in grassroots movements for change,” Gardner told The Seminole Tribune.

The program requires three in-person meetings. Gardner said the next group will meet two times in Washington, D.C., and a third time at a location to be determined.

The NIHB’s location in Washington is important because its staff regularly works with members of Congress, federal agencies and Tribal leaders, Gardner added.

“We are in a good position to offer meaningful educational experiences to Native youth who want to make a difference,” she said.

Meet the movers and shakers

Gardner said the first class of fellows took their experience and translated it into work within their respective communities; many spoke at national conferences about their policy research projects; and they helped develop two national resolutions that were passed by the NIHB board.

“They also met with their members of Congress and educated them on different health topics,” Gardner said. “In fact, some of the content from fellow’s behavioral health resolution made its way into a bill considered by the U.S. Congress.”

The first group reported the experience as overwhelmingly positive.

The inaugural class, which didn’t have any Seminole or Miccosukee Tribal members, included Alec Calac (Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians).



After his experience in the fellowship program, Alec Calac has been advocating that campus leaders address the underrepresentation of Natives in medicine.

(Courtesy photo)

Calac graduated from the University of Arizona in 2016 with a degree in neuroscience and biology. He was then involved in a number of health care and research related programs and made connections with policy makers and legislators.

Through the fellowship, Calac worked on issues like curbing childhood obesity and diabetes by strengthening food sovereignty in Indian Country; creating a special behavioral health program for Indians with a focus on culture as prevention; and promoting K-12 and higher education attainment.

“One of my highlights in the fellowship was traveling to Anchorage, Alaska, for the NIHB National Tribal Public Health Summit in 2017 and addressing the audience in my tribe’s language and sharing some of my experiences in the fellowship,” he said.

Calac is now in medical school at the University of California San Diego and has been advocating that campus leaders address the underrepresentation of Natives in medicine.

“My experience in the NIHB fellowship has drastically improved my public speaking skills and I am confident in presenting my ‘asks’ for meaningful change across the board when it comes to increasing opportunity for Native youth,” Calac said.

‘Helped me gain confidence’

Natahlia Enoah (Diné) is working toward her master’s degree in health education at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. She is a community health coordinator at the Center for Community Health at Presbyterian Healthcare Services.

“The fellowship helped me gain confidence in myself as a youth leader and has showed me the importance of youth involvement in policy decision making,” Enoah said.



Natahlia Enoah said the fellowship helped her gain confidence as a youth leader and showed her the importance of youth involvement in policy decision making. (Courtesy photo)

Inaugural fellow Chris Gallo's father was the first American Indian surgical pathologist and spent the beginning of his career working for Indian Health Services in Phoenix. Gallo was born in Phoenix and grew up in Prescott.

"I raised more like an 'urban Native' as some would say - and did not fully connect with my heritage and Native culture until I attended the University of Arizona," he said.

At U of A he participated in the American Indian Alumni Club and delved deep into culture, perspectives and current events of several communities in Arizona, he said, including the Tohono O'odham, Pascua Yaqui, and White Mountain Apache.

"On this journey I learned about the health care disparities that impact these people. I became motivated to help and I founded the organization - American Indian Medical and Health Initiatives," he said.

Through his organization Gallo would teach high school students about exercise and heart health by coming to their science class and leading them through sheep heart dissections.

He's now in the process of finishing his medical degree at Duke University.



Chris Gallo said the fellowship inspired him to set a career goal to help eliminate Native American health care disparities. (Courtesy photo)

“The fellowship was one of the best experiences of my life. I knew a decent amount about health care before the fellowship, but absolutely nothing about policy,” he said. “I was also astounded by the different perspectives each fellow brought to the table - we had a filmmaker, a scientist, and now someone who is an elected Tribal official. I couldn’t have asked for a better experience and I felt like I made a difference in the lives of Native Peoples.”

The NIHB works through its Congressional relations team and federal relations team to strengthen Tribal public health systems and advocates to ensure the federal government upholds its trust responsibility to provide quality Tribal health care. The NIHB also has a public health team. It’s the organization’s youth department which offers the health policy fellowship.

For more information, a full list of eligibility requirements, and to fill out an application, go to nihb.org/for_youth. Those interested can also contact Gardner via email at wgardner@nihb.org or by calling (202) 548-7297.

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