



The Navajo Nation
Office of the President and Vice President

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**President Nez supports Indigenous healthcare
workforce expansion with the UCSF HEAL Initiative**



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez stands with UCSF HEAL representatives including Navajo Fellows Dr. Adriann Begay, Dr. Cristina Rivera Carpenter and Dr. Marla Yazzie in front of Window Rock Tribal Park Wednesday.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – On Wednesday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Navajo Department of Health (NDOH) Executive Director Dr. Jill Jim met with University of California San Francisco’s Health Equity, Action & Leadership Initiative (HEAL) co-founder Dr. Sriram Shamasunder in Window Rock, Ariz., to discuss and strengthen the Navajo Nation’s ongoing partnership to help expand the Indigenous Healthcare workforce on the Navajo Nation.

In 2020, President Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer welcomed several HEAL team members that arrived to the Navajo Nation from the state of California to help the Navajo Nation’s frontline workers at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

HEAL trains and transforms frontline health professionals by building a community dedicated to serving the under-served. Since 2015, the HEAL Initiative has served over 25,000 Navajo patients, annually, and supported 165 healthcare workers through its two-year fellowship program. HEAL fellows have filled key vacancies in nine of the Navajo Nation's hospitals and clinics, including a "solidarity team" of 40 additional doctors and nurses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We need more Navajo professionals in the healthcare field. Our young people and allies through programs like the HEAL hold a great deal of valuable information we need to continue our Navajo way of life teachings while updating our systems and community initiatives. We envision being able to take on a lot more responsibilities to embrace true self-governance through T'áá Hwó Ají Téego, self-determination, and empowering our healthcare workers is a major step in that direction. We recognize and thank the HEAL medical team for standing shoulder to shoulder with our frontline warriors throughout this pandemic," said President Nez.

During the visit, President Nez and NDOH Executive Director Dr. Jim also commended HEAL Co-founder Dr. Shamasunder and former Navajo HEAL fellows Dr. Adriann Begay, Dr. Cristina Rivera Carpenter, and Dr. Marla Yazzie for their leadership and going above and beyond the healthcare services they provide to the Navajo people.

HEAL fellow, Dr. Yazzie, noted during the discussion that the group is a part of the few Indigenous physicians that make up less than 0.4% of all practicing physicians in the United States. She stated, "Through the HEAL program, I have been empowered to take care of my people. I feel very strongly that the caliber of people the program brings into our facilities is tremendous."

NDOH Executive Director Dr. Jim added, "The program continues to provide critical medical staffing needs across the Nation throughout the pandemic and the retention rate is a success in keeping professionals here to improve the health of the Navajo people. I truly appreciate their partnership and contributions to the Navajo Nation."

To date, over 60 Navajo health professionals have participated in the HEAL Initiative, and 20 physicians have taken permanent positions on the Navajo Nation following fellowship experience. The Nez-Lizer Administration continues to support HEAL's efforts to expand their tribal health support initiatives globally and appreciates their partnerships with the Indian Health Services and the Navajo Department of Health.

The HEAL program currently has 149 fellows and will also be seeking additional funding to increase the 1-percent demographic of American Indian and Alaskan Native medical school students. Individuals interested in becoming a HEAL Fellow can visit the UCSF website at <https://healinitiative.org> for more information.

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