



VITAL RELIEF

Montana tribes' \$200 million path to alleviate the pandemic

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Dear reader,

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act was signed into law. This \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus, also known as the CARES Act, was intended to provide critical assistance in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Of that, \$8 billion went to tribal governments across the country. The 12 federally recognized tribes in Montana received \$200 million collectively, with each tribal nation allocated at least \$14 million and up to 44 million. Though the spending had to tie back to the coronavirus in some manner, individual tribal governments were largely free to use the money in ways that best served their communities.

The impacts of COVID-19, while felt across the country, have been disproportionately strong in Indian Country. High death rates, loss of culture-keeping elders and isolation plagued tribal communities, elevating the severity of the crisis. Embedded in the CARES Act was the opportunity for at least some kind of relief.

Students in the 2021 Native News Honors Project set out to learn more about how Montana tribes responded to the coronavirus pandemic, looking specifically at how CARES Act funding was used to alleviate their most pressing issues. These funds were not spent identically. Tribes sought to mitigate the pandemic’s direct effects but also saw an opportunity to address long-standing disparities, stemming from historic inequities perpetrated by the federal government. While the novel

coronavirus did not create these issues, it exacerbated them.

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians bought a clinic to start its own health center after years of inequity in health care access. East of the Rocky Mountains, the Blackfeet Nation updated telecommunications infrastructure, improving internet and cellular service throughout the reservation. The Crow tribe launched its own police force, which would ultimately shut down months later. And in the town of Frazer, money from the CARES Act went toward fixing a leaking wastewater lagoon on the Fort Peck reservation, opening up possibilities for new development.

On the Fort Belknap reservation, community members used cultural practices as a form of youth suicide prevention. The Flathead Indian Reservation addressed a serious houselessness issue, using CARES Act funds to purchase homes. On the Northern Cheyenne reservation, administrators at the local high school worked tirelessly to lessen the impact of isolation after the reservation’s public school remained closed throughout the pandemic.

While each story is different, they are woven from a common thread. The coronavirus pandemic is one of the greatest catastrophes of our lifetime. The following pages tell stories of grief, resilience, tribulation and recovery.

Sincerely,

Montana Native News
Honors Project Staff

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If you have comments about the project, email jason.begay@umontana.edu or jeremy.lurgio@umontana.edu or write to Native News, School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812

COVER PHOTO BY SARAH MOSQUERA
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Print Editor: Alex Miller

Photo Editor: Claire Shinner

Designers: Griffen Smith
Megan Johnson
Olivia Swant-Johnson

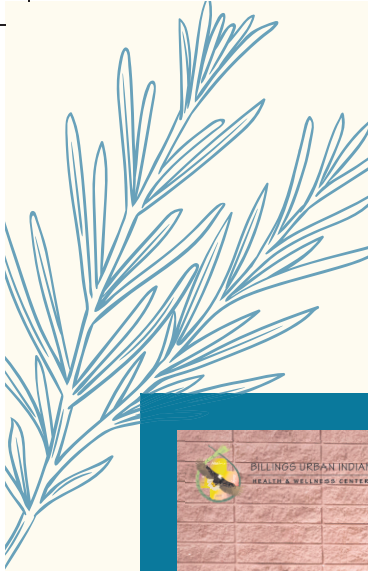
Copy Chief: Alicia McAlpine

Advisers: Jason Begay
Jeremy Lurgio



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Story by Nikki Zambon

Photos by Olivia Swant-Johnson

A row of police vehicles, purchased with CARES Act funding, sits gathering tumbleweeds and flat tires in the parking lot of administrative offices in Crow Agency on March 12, 2021.

In November, 2020, Braven Glenn, a 17-year-old honor student and basketball player, was killed on Interstate 90 during a high speed chase with the newly formed Crow Nation Police Department. His vehicle reportedly went off the road and collided with an oncoming train, although details are hard to find.

His family has tried repeatedly to access his death and toxicology reports, but did not receive them until four months after his death. The Bureau of Indian Affairs told his mother, Blossom Old Bull, the incident was under investigation. When the reports came back, they showed that he had died from blunt force trauma. The

toxicology report showed there was alcohol and marijuana in his system.

The Crow Nation Department was only five months old when its officers chased down Glenn.

“How are people you’re supposed to trust to protect you in this community the same as the people that could kill you for speeding?” said Scott Old Bull, Glenn’s brother.

Further complicating the search for answers, the Crow Nation Police Department was closed shortly after Glenn’s death. There were many questions surrounding what happened.

The family is still waiting for an official

police report of the incident more than five months later. They still have no idea what happened the night Glenn died and who should be held responsible.

“The tribal police did not help this community,” Blossom Old Bull said. “It caused more damage than good. We feel like they are hiding something but we just want justice for our baby boy because his senseless death didn’t have to happen.”

The BIA has refused several times to comment on the subject.

Here is what we know: In June, the Crow tribe, which had been angling for years to create its own tribal police force and take over its law enforcement from federal

control, used a chunk of the \$27 million federal CARES Act money to speed up the process. Then, in late November, the Crow Nation Police shut down completely, with little notice as to why, although talk among the community said the department was under multiple investigations.

Here is what we don’t know: How much CARES Act money was used to create the force including purchasing about 30 vehicles, the building the police department operated out of, the two unused shipping containers that were meant to detain people, and the officers’ salaries. We don’t know who is conducting the investigation into the lawfulness of using CARES Act

money to create a police force. We don’t know if the Crow tribe even had the jurisdiction to erect a tribal police force.

However, Crow residents are confused and angry that a community resource as integral as the police has been made into a mess.

The Crow reservation is located in southeastern Montana, bordered by Wyoming and the Northern Cheyenne reservation. And it’s big. It covers a span of about 2.3 million acres, or approximately 3,600 square miles, making it the largest reservation in Montana and sixth largest in the country. But despite the expansive land, there are only around 7,900 individuals currently residing on it.

When COVID-19 hit the reservation in April, Alvin “AJ” Not Afraid Jr., the then-tribal chairman, put approximately \$4 million in CARES Act funds towards a community project called Incident Command.

The project, which based its operations in the Apsáalooke Casino in Crow Agency, consisted of tribal members acting as a COVID-19 response team, performing community duties from delivering food, water and sanitation supplies to pulling out vehicles stuck in the reservation’s muddy hills.

Across the road from Incident Command sat the Little Bighorn Casino. It closed up years ago, the glass doors shattered, chairs stacked in front to prevent illegal entrances.

Stationed in its parking lot were six tribal police vehicles. At least another 20 had been taken elsewhere, under investigation, according to the new administration.

The vehicles in the casino parking lot were lined up, side-by-side. They were kept under a bright spotlight for months. Their “Crow Nation Police” emblems were torn off because the new administration feared people would think the police station was still up and running.

There were three used Dodge Chargers and three brand new, white 2020 Chevy Tahoes. One had a tumbleweed wedged underneath the front grill. Another’s tire was flat.

The insides were fully-equipped with radios, microphones, steel barriers and hard, plastic bucket seats for the arrestees. In the trunk was safety hazard equipment

and a lockcase, which contained computer tablets.

The vehicles were purchased by the former administration under Chairman Not Afraid, using CARES Act money to erect a police force in hopes of mitigating the negative and possibly violent side effects of the pandemic.

“In the realm of COVID, people were becoming unsteady,” Not Afraid said. “If you tested positive, people treated you like a leper. Law enforcement had to get involved because people were getting threatened.”

Karl Little Owl, who worked as chief operating officer under Not Afraid, was concerned that the reservation would see a spike in crime.

“Our challenge as a tribe is that there is no public safety anywhere,” Little Owl said. “We have missing and murdered people, meth and now a health emergency.”

He was concerned about how quarantining would affect community members.

“During the stay at home order, we were seeing more cases of child abuse, domestic abuse and child neglect and thought there was a correlation,” Little Owl said.

Prior to the formation of the tribal police, the BIA managed law enforcement on the reservation.

In Montana, the BIA regional office is located in Billings, an hour’s drive from Crow Agency.

But on the Crow reservation itself, there are only between one and four BIA officers operating out of two small mobile trailers. That’s four individuals guarding a reservation roughly the size of Connecticut. For comparison, Connecticut has 6,628 police officers patrolling the state.

The BIA is a federal agency founded in 1824, formerly known as the Office of Indian Affairs, and has had a contentious history with Native Americans.

Tribes were forced onto reservations and by the 1880s, the BIA became entirely in charge of operating schools, justice systems and land leasing.

Over the decades, more and more tribes have invoked self-determination to take over programs internally, and in Montana, four tribes have taken over law enforcement. Crow hadn’t had its own police force in more than 30 years.

Because of its long history in Indian Country, the BIA police have lost the trust of many Native Americans who say the



Scott Old Bull stands outside of Teepee Service gas station where he works. On November 24, 2020, his brother Braven Glenn, 17, was struck and killed by an oncoming train while being pursued by Crow Nation Police.

federal agency has little care for protecting them from crime on the reservation.

Scott Old Bull, who worked at the local gas station called Teepee Service on Crow Agency, said he wouldn’t serve BIA officers when they came into the store.

“I’m against the BIA. They are not doing anything,” Old Bull said. “There was a shooting here last week and it took three

hours for the BIA officers to respond. Their office is just right around the corner.”

With such a large swath of land and so few officers safeguarding it, crime on the Crow reservation was commonplace.

According to the most recent report released by the Department of Justice in 2017, there were 179 reported property



Lodge Grass is one of seven towns on the Crow reservation. One tribal elder in Lodge Grass, who asked not to be named due to concerns for her own well-being, said: "Every night we hear sirens, see car chases, see ambulances. Almost every night we hear gunshots."

crimes, four murders, 102 cases of larceny-theft and 51 motor vehicle thefts. Crow had the highest numbers in these categories compared to other tribes in the state. Crow country also had the highest rates of missing persons in the state.

According to the Department of Justice, the number of missing persons on Crow was only going up. From 2017 to 2019, the number increased from 26 to 37.

Former Chairman Not Afraid sought to create and implement tribally run law enforcement through a federal contract, an order established under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

A successful transfer of power requires the federal government to supply the tribe with whatever money it would have spent on the federal program, function, service or activity it initially oversaw.

Not Afraid’s administration had submitted at least two contract applications and both had been denied.

In 2018, Not Afraid sent a letter to Charles Addington, director of the BIA, declaring a state of emergency on the reservation in response to “yet another public safety incident” after a gun was shot during the theft of a vehicle in Lodge Grass.

Many on the reservation pointed to the major highway, I-90, which runs through the reservation, as the cause for the drugs and missing persons.

“They need to get drugs off the street,” Old Bull said. “Interstate 90 is easy to access. Anything could get in here and be gone just like that. The police can’t recognize every car that passes through.”

Not Afraid’s wife, Deneen Not Afraid, said in an email that her husband had

supported her decision to start a task force that focused on missing and murdered indigenous persons because she was not satisfied with the response of the BIA.

“Tribal members were going missing and the Crow people could not rely on the BIA to provide effective police services,” she wrote. Deneen Not Afraid said the tribe had numerous meetings with the BIA, the Montana U.S. Attorney’s Office, and Big Horn County Commissioners to no avail. “It became clear that the Crow tribe could not rely on any outside government entity to provide justice and law enforcement for the Crow people.”

Even without the approval of the federal application to take over law enforcement, Not Afraid’s administration met with newly hired consultants and “health partners” who told them that addressing public safety should be the number one concern

during the pandemic. The administration was given the green light to form a tribal police force.

Along with the vehicles, the administration hired at least 15 officers. They bought a former museum in Garryowen, a town near Crow Agency, and transformed it into the newly appointed tribal police force’s headquarters. “Mobile jails,” or shipping containers equipped with electrical wiring and small holding cells, were purchased to act as temporary detainment units. They were never used.

Dawn Plenty Hoops, the tribe’s new procurement director, said people were upset with the way CARES Act funds were distributed.

She would have liked to see the money spent on larger stimulus checks and Inci-



Terrill Bracken was hired as chief of the Crow Nation Police. After being fired in July of 2020 he went back to training mixed martial arts fighters for the Fusion Fight League and the gRound boxing gym in Billings Heights.



As procurement director for the Crow tribe, Dawn Plenty Hoops is in charge of all assets and inventory. The window of her office faces the row of police vehicles and the cars' keys are in her drawer. "Such a waste of money," Plenty Hoops said.

dent Command operations. The tribe disbursed a total of \$800 to adults only. She wasn’t fond of what she and others had begun calling the “COVID cops.”

“They were just in the way. They didn’t know tribal law,” she said.

The Crow Nation Police force was made up of many non-native personnel.

According to Terrill Bracken, who was hired as the police chief for the tribal force, the idea was to pair trained officers, who were not from the reservation, with tribal members who knew the law, in hopes of building a balanced and unbiased force.

“No one wants to pull over their aunty and give them a ticket,” Bracken said.

Bracken, a non-tribal member who resided outside of the reservation, said he was skeptical when Not Afraid called him in 2018 about starting a police force.

Bracken was an experienced law enforcement officer with 13 years under his belt, so he was wary of the tales of corrupt governments and serious violence on the Crow reservation. But when he met with Not Afraid and discussed their shared policing philosophy and how badly the reservation needed security, Bracken jumped on board.

His job as a mixed martial arts trainer and fight organizer was put on hold while he worked with Not Afraid’s administration. They tried for two-and-a-half years to get a law enforcement department up



Petra “Pilu” Pretty On Top has worked as the postmistress in Garryowen since 2015. The post office shared the building with the Crow Police Department until the police force disbanded in November of 2020.

and running, applying for private and federal funding and submitting the federal applications.

Then COVID-19 hit. And just a month after the federal CARES funds were received in May, the Crow Nation Police force was in full swing. It is unclear, although unlikely, that the BIA had approved of the tribe’s law enforcement plan, as required in the self-determination process. Regardless, Bracken was fired a month later.

While grocery shopping with his mother, Bracken received a phone call from William Falls Down, who was the newly appointed acting public safety director, informing him of his termination.

“I put my blood, sweat and tears into getting this thing off the ground,” Bracken said.

He suspected the termination had to do with differing views he and Falls Down had on how the police force should function. Politics, he said.

“It was heartbreaking. It affected my family and we went into a financial tailspin,” Bracken said.

The Crow Nation Police department was shut down in November, just before Not Afraid was voted out of his chairman post and replaced with Frank Whiteclay.

The police department was boarded up.

The shipping containers sat, untouched, with the blue packing tarp waving in the wind.

The change in administration was a difficult shift for the community.

There is always some level of confusion when a tribal administration makes a shift in leadership. In this instance, that seemed even more so, said Jacob Stops, who was hired in the new administration as Incident Command information officer and grants coordinator.

Stops had spent much of his time trying to track down where, exactly, the \$27 million in CARES Act funds went under the former administration.

There were few spending records and the former administration hired accountants from off the reservation, so Stops didn’t get very far. And when it came to getting people to talk, it was a real challenge.

“We’re all related around here. You have to understand, the walls have eyes and ears,” Stops said.

When Frank Whiteclay was elected at the beginning of December, the police force had already been disbanded for a few weeks.

Whiteclay and Not Afraid stood on different political platforms; Whiteclay interested in investing in clean energy, Not Afraid trying to reinvigorate the reservation’s coal resources. Whiteclay was



Frank Whiteclay was elected chairman of the Crow tribe in December of 2020, just weeks after the Crow Nation Police department was disbanded. Whiteclay sees a need for improving law enforcement, but he believes the use of CARES Act funding to establish the police department was illegal. “We have to follow the law; if it’s not allowed it’s not allowed,” he said.

interested in showing face on the reservation and employing tribal members, while Not Afraid worked from home and hired non-tribal members as his right hand people

But both of these men agreed on the need for a greater public safety presence. They both felt four BIA officers on the largest reservation in Montana wasn’t enough. How to gain that presence was where their viewpoints split.

According to Whiteclay, using the CARES Act funds to establish a tribal police force did not fall within the Department of the Treasury’s CARES Act spending guidelines.

Whiteclay said the CARES funds were supposed to go into a separate account and be properly managed, but as far as he could tell, that never happened. The former administration bought items for the new police department — without ap-

proval from the tribe’s legislature — and were simply “playing cops.”

“We’re still trying to figure out exactly where that money went,” he said.

Tiffany Figuero, an auditor working specifically with CARES Act questions within the Department of Treasury’s Office of Inspector General, said the spending guidelines weren’t black and white, intentionally so.

“These guidelines are broad because different tribes have different needs. For example, some tribes need clean, running water, while others need housing for the homeless,” Figuero said.

She said there are only three rules that are hard and fast when it comes to CARES Act spending: The money was to be spent by the end of 2020, which was later extended to December 2021. Tribes must be upfront and transparent with their purchases. Lastly, the money had to

be used in response to, or in mitigation of, the pandemic.

Figuero said public safety has been one of the main uses for CARES Act funds. But when it came to erecting an entire police force from scratch with the money, she was unsure.

“If you wanted to buy new things for a long time but didn’t have the funds, but now have funds through the CARES Act, you are not eligible to do so unless there is a rational COVID link,” she said.

In Whiteclay’s mind, there were more clear and pressing things the money could have gone to in response to the pandemic.

“There are folks without clean water, heat or electricity and waste management is a huge issue,” he said. “It’s sad that we’re in the middle of America and this is still happening.”

The new administration has focused on creating a more elaborate and long-term

role for Incident Command on the reservation called Apsáalooke Service Corp.

The goal is to expand response and care services. They would also like to address crime by rerouting young offenders from juvenile detention centers to community service efforts.

Thor Hoyte, the administration’s general counsel, said he was excited to be carving out a space for this program.

“(Apsáalooke Service Corp) would be reaching out to elders, putting youth to work and delivering food,” Hoyte said. “Prosecutors and judges are so excited because this involves the community. Picking up trash to pay back their community. It’s better than letting people sit in a county jail that we pay \$300 a day for.”

By April, 82% of the Crow reservation was fully vaccinated and zero COVID-19 cases had been reported in Big Horn County. The new administration held an air of determination.

Despite all the crime and confusion regarding the now disbanded tribal police department, Chairman Whiteclay had a vision of the future and it even involved the dormant police cars.

“We’re moving into a self-determination contract, starting with Fish and Game,” Whiteclay said. They hope to sign an agreement in the coming months that would allow Fish and Game to use the vehicles

Whiteclay said the tribe needs its own police force but there was a right way to go about it, and it involved taking baby steps.

“If development has taken place on a reservation, it’s a monument to someone’s perseverance and their ability to do paperwork,” he said.

Hoyte said the administration was planning on growing into their role incrementally.

“You almost always start with protecting the landbase and then work your way up into other policing functions,” he said.

They weren’t sure how long it would take to have a fully developed tribal police department, but time wasn’t their main concern.

“We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, we just need to go through the process,” Whiteclay said. ♦



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RISE TO THE CHALLENGE.



The lagoon built in the '60s sits 500 feet from the Frazer School and right next to the location of the new lagoon.

Story by Griffen Smith
Photos by John Paul Edge

The town of Frazer, Montana has a population of less than 400, supporting a public school, elders’ food hall, and two businesses: a convenience store and a bar. So, when Angie Toce-Blount, who owns the bar, the Beer Mug, planned out her 52nd birthday party, she knew the theme would be ‘80s, with her family and friends — including her sobriety group. The location was not a challenge to her resolve, but a decision made out of necessity. “I’m nervous, this is the first time my

medicine brothers will all be together, in a bar of all things,” she said. “In town, it’s the only place to go out, and that is a sad statement.” Frazer is a small highline town on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, home to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. It sits just out of sight from the meandering Missouri River. Toce-Blount inherited the Beer Mug from her mom in 1997, when it was being rebuilt. Now, over 20 years since the reconstruction, it is still one of the newest buildings in Frazer, which has long

been stunted due to poor infrastructure that has canceled any type of development in the town. Specifically, there is a 20-year construction moratorium due to a leaking sewer lagoon. The two water chambers at the end of town have been omnipresent to anyone who has lived there. The lagoon’s legacy, harming both the environment and the town, is in the back of residents’ minds. “We need help. We need outlets, we need rehab [clinics]. We need a lot of things,” Toce-Blount said. “But if we

wait for our tribe or somebody else to do it, we’re going to be waiting another 20 years.” But then came the pandemic, and a strange hope. With \$4 million in funds from the federal CARES Act, Frazer can fix the root of its problem: a leaking, undersized wastewater lagoon. Shirley Flynn first moved onto Joe Butch Street, named after her great grandfather, in 1981. She took a job cooking at the Frazer K-12 school while



Shirley Flynn stands outside of her house on Butch Street in Frazer. The street was named after her great-grandfather. Flynn said that since the moratorium, “Houses have boarded up, people have left, and others go and squat in the abandoned places”.

raising two boys on the east side of town. Back then Flynn recalled a grocery store, a bank, a cafe — anything a person needed was there. But now, she can barely recognize Frazer. She grew up in town, went to the school and raised a family in her lime green house, which she said is now in need of a new coat. “Houses have boarded up, people have left, and others go and squat in the abandoned places,” Flynn said as she swept up some brush from her front yard. As an elder, she has gotten support from the community like food and retirement money. But her husband passed away five years ago from diabetes, and her kids don’t live in town. She does most things at her house, alone, or with her dog Daisy. “I just live day-to-day,” Flynn said. “I know we are getting a new lagoon, but I think things will take a long time to get better.” Frazer has shrunk in the last 20 years,

dropping from 500 at the turn of the century, to under 400 now. According to the US Census Bureau, Frazer’s average income was \$28,036, compared to the national average of \$31,133. Eighty-six percent of adult residents have at least a high school diploma. Many residents leave after they graduate. Sasha Fourstar was one of them. She enlisted in the U.S. Army in the ‘90s, serving eight years. But she always knew she would return to her hometown of Frazer. Now, Fourstar works as a full-time mechanic for a farm a mile south of town, while also stepping up as Frazer’s mayor, even though she’s never been content with the job. “Our local elders thought it’d be a good idea to put me in a mayor position, even though I hate politics,” Fourstar said. “But when an Elder asks you to do something, you do it.” The mayor reactivated the community council 10 years ago, though it has tak-

en occasional short absences. There are three other voting members alongside Fourstar, including Toce-Blount, who is vice chair. The council has made packages with school supplies, applied for grant funding and planned community spaces, though none of them can be built yet. Without the basic need of new buildings met, Fourstar said her community is struggling. “It’s a town that’s forgotten; our population is dying,” Fourstar said. “We have a little post office, and a little senior center, and that’s pretty much all we have in town, the rest are homes. We have to drive 30 minutes either way to get anything.” To compound it all, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Fort Peck reservation hard. Data compiled from Johns Hopkins University said the virus killed more than 40 and infected at least 900 of the tribes’ 11,700 members. Toce-Blount estimated more than 80%



Angie Toce-Blount stands outside of the Beer Mug, the only bar in Frazer, Montana, just before her 52nd birthday party on March 20, 2021.

“We were looking to build a quarantine center for Frazer; [COVID-19] was really bad where we needed to quarantine people in multigenerational homes, and you can’t even hook into the lagoon anymore because it’s in such bad shape”
-Kaci Walette, Fort Peck Tribal Council



Nationwide, rural infrastructure has been in need of repair. Frazer's most important is water infrastructure

of Frazer's 360 people have been infected. Two residents died.

"A lot of these Native American families live pretty close-knit," Fourstar said. "So once somebody gets COVID, they just kind of spread like wildfire. Wildfire through the families."

Fort Peck made efforts to contain the virus, from giving students online classes to providing all members buffalo meat from the tribes' ranch. The most critical support for Frazer, however, was building a quarantine center, which has been all but impossible.

"We were looking to build a quarantine center for Frazer; [COVID-19] was

really bad where we needed to quarantine people in multigenerational homes," said tribal council member Kaci Wallette. "And you can't even hook into the lagoon anymore because it's in such bad shape."

Wallette sits as chair on the tribes' economic development committee and is also on Gov. Greg Gianforte's coronavirus response team. For the last year, she and her council members focused on responding to the pandemic.

In the first two weeks of the national emergency, the council received a massive boost in emergency funds. Congress passed the CARES Act on March 27,

2020, a \$2.2 trillion bill made to stimulate the economy. Roughly \$10 billion was allocated to tribes and its federal agencies.

The Treasury Department gave \$2 billion to federal agencies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and divided the rest to tribes based on population and federal housing data.

Fort Peck received \$29 million from the federal government.

The money, allocated by the Fort Peck Tribal Council, was originally ordered by the U.S. Treasury Department to be spent by the end of 2020. By the time an extension was ordered in December,

the tribes had already planned out, and spent, all the money.

Aside from the majority of funding sent in the form of stimulus payments to tribal members, Fort Peck's largest expenditure was the \$4.1 million lagoon project to fix and expand the lagoon in Frazer.

In 1967, Frazer invested in a central sewage system, which took all the gray and black wastewater produced from the buildings in town. The pipes all led to a 4-acre, open air lagoon made out of clay



Toce-Blount applies eye shadow as her adopted niece, Alyssa, curls her hair in preparation for her '80s-themed party.

and rock 500 feet away from the school and some houses.

Basic lagoons treat water with natural bacterias to eat organic material. After the water is cleared, it can be discharged, depending on the lagoon. But after sealing its discharge pipe in 1993, the lagoon in Frazer holds the water to evaporate.

Tom Daugherty, a licensed lagoon operator and adjunct professor at Gonzaga University, said lagoons have long been the preferred way to treat waste for small, spread out communities.

"They are low cost and high lifetime," Daugherty said. He has been working to build new state-of-the-art treatment fa-

cilities, ones that better process the water.

He said many lagoons built in the '60s run on basic clay liners, which he said break down over time. Tina Magnum, a tribal utilities operator who works on the lagoon, said the holding space was supposed to fill up by 2020. As early as 1994, however, the tribe realized something was wrong.

"The only reason the current lagoon still functions is because it leaks," said Ryan Kopp, head engineer on the project.

Kopp works at Interstate Engineering, a civil engineering group based in North Dakota. The firm is contracted to handle

Fort Peck's infrastructure projects, and a 2010 engineering report it produced detailed the extent of damage the lagoon was causing.

For at least 20 years, the water has leaked more than 48 gallons per person per day, adding up to over 7 million gallons per year. Kopp attributed it to a weakening of the clay liner.

The leaking water seeps down roughly 80 feet into an aquifer. According to the 2010 report, the leaking water was over 14 times above the acceptable maximum allowed by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

The lagoon is also too small to contin-

ue to add water flow, which led the tribe to stop all new pipes that would continue to worsen the lagoon. The 2003 building moratorium halted virtually all construction in Frazer, except for a couple houses with separate septic tanks. No more community buildings, except an elders food bank, after school center, post office and the K-12 school, still stand.

Like Frazer, 15% of all wastewater treatment centers in the U.S. have been running at — or over — their original capacity, according to a 2021 report from the American Society of Civil Engineers. The group rated the country's waste infrastructure as a D+, adding that many

wastewater plants have already reached their 40 to 50-year lifespans.

Toce-Blount first got into community service work three years ago, when her brother needed to go to rehab. The two went together. While Toce-Blount never considered alcohol a problem, after a few meetings she realized she struggled with drinking.

“I think I became a new person that day,” she said. “I found God, and I give it all to him for giving me a new start, with new people.”

Toce-Blount has since stepped up in her sobriety group, called Medicine Wheel, driving people to rehab on the reservation. The day before her birthday, she got a call from her Medicine Wheel group asking her to drive two drug addicts to a recovery center in Poplar, 40 minutes away.

“I looked for them, called them, but these ladies were nowhere to be found,” Toce-Blount said. “We need a recovery center here, but we couldn’t build it. Everyone has to be sent to Wolf Point, and that distance matters.”

After she went to her sobriety group, she met and married her wife, Delane Blount. The two foster and adopt kids, more than a dozen in the last few years. Currently, three of Delane’s nieces live with her, and Toce-Blount plans for all of them to graduate high school.

As she prepared her 52nd birthday party, her niece, Alyssa, 16, slowly curled Toce-Blount’s hair. Two of her siblings, Kailiana and Marylyn, helped their aunt by getting flashy jewelry.

“The ‘80s were such a fun time,” Toce-Blount said, putting a layer of blush onto her face. “I had a big liking to rock music, even though they scream a lot.”

“Last strand, auntie,” Alyssa said as she pulled a handheld curler through Toce-Blount’s straight brown hair.

“I’m not that strict of a parent,” Toce-Blount said to the room. “I have expectations for y’all, but I am encouraging. What do I always say, girls? What is your limit?”

“The stars, auntie,” Alyssa responded. Toce-Blount adopted her, alongside her two sisters. Her middle child, Kailiana, spends most of her time making art or biking around town with her sisters.

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“You have to do something around here,” Kailiana, 15, said. During the stay at home order, she picked up playing guitar. She and her sisters started a band, and named it The Runaways.

She’s always liked Frazer, but when she graduates high school, she doesn’t plan to stay forever.

“I want to go to New York City,” she said. “There’s just so much out there that I want to see.”

Alyssa hopes to leave the town too. After getting straight A’s in her first two years of high school, she plans to get into Harvard or Stanford.

“I give them tough love,” Toce-Blount said. “They deserve a chance to get out and see the world, and I think they can.”

Inside the fence of the lagoon, the sounds of barking dogs and car engines drift through the barbed wire, but no one goes near the water. When the sun touches and heats the stagnant surface, a foul smell permeates Frazer, carried by the whipping plains winds.



ABOVE: Agnes Johnston, a member of the Assiniboiné tribe, has lived in Frazer most of her life. “I sit here and think ‘that gas station went first and then it was the grocery store,’” Johnston recalled. “Most of it burned down or just couldn’t be repaired.”

BELOW: For at least 20 years, the lagoon has leaked more than 7 million gallons per year. According to a 2010 report, the leaking water was more than 14 times above the acceptable maximum allowed by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.



Toce-Blount sits with her sobriety group sponsor Wayne Martell and her son Anthony Mazawasicuna during her 52nd birthday party at the Beer Mug.

There are five lagoons on the Fort Peck reservation. Frazer was the only lagoon that documented a leak, though all five of the lagoons needed to be expanded. The Indian Health Service, part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, installed 11 monitoring wells next to the lagoon in 1993.

The tribes were responsible for fixing the lagoon, but had no way to foot the bill of the project. The most likely option was to get grant money from the BIA. But besides some minor maintenance, no action was taken by the Fort Peck tribes or federal agencies.

“We were trying to get funding through IHS before to get the lagoon fixed,” Wallete said. “But stuff just kept falling through.”

The aquifer at Frazer, and even miles downstream, tested high for nitrates. For adults, the chemicals aren’t harmful, but they could cause deadly liver-based diseases, such as methemoglobinemia, for infants and pregnant women.

Since 2007, however, Frazer and the rest of the reservation have been using clean, pumped-in water from a treatment center in Wolf Point, a town 25 miles away. Some residents out of town still use older well systems.

A 2003 capital improvement plan made by the Fort Peck tribes also recommended the Frazer lagoon be expanded five times larger, which would likely cost more than \$1 million. The internal report also stated the lagoon was leaking 15 million gallons a year, far higher than Kopp’s 2010 report.

“You smell the stink when it gets windy around here,” resident Agnes Johnston said. “And before they piped in water, you could smell it from the tap.”

As a resident of Frazer for more than 50 years, she watched all her immediate neighbors abandon their homes. Many of the previous residents passed away, but some near Johnston left town for better jobs in Wolf Point or Glasgow, an off-reservation town west of Frazer.

Their houses aged alone, and now most are unlivable. There have been no plans to replace them.

Johnston worked in Poplar, a larger town about an hour away. Each day she commuted from Frazer to the other side of the reservation, often in treacherous winter weather. She said the town has changed: the stagnant state has taken its toll.

“I sit here and think ‘that gas station went first, and then it was the grocery store,’” Johnston recalled. “Most of it burned down or just couldn’t be repaired.”

Yet, with a new lagoon, there is hope. Kopp said the new lagoon will be five times larger than the current one and have a synthetic liner, which is much more reliable than its clay counterpart. In March 2021, Interstate Engineering had already dug six feet down, across five acres south of the lagoon.

“They won’t have to redo their lagoon ever again,” Wallete said. “And the

CARES Act has an infrastructure clause. I know other reservations have used the money to redo their roads, or water or water pipes.”

The Blackfeet reservation used its CARES Act money to fund a solid waste program. The Little Shell tribe purchased and renovated a health center exclusively for its own members.

Fort Peck also invested \$1 million in a new wellness center in Poplar. Wallete said the tribe has been prioritizing basic infrastructure, as well as community infrastructure, like rehab centers, playgrounds and gyms.

With another stimulus package passed in March, another \$31 billion is on its way to tribal governments. In Frazer, Kopp said the next infrastructure project will be installing potable water systems.

“We plan to do more after this lagoon has finished this spring,” Wallete said. “Then we’re going to give Frazer a new quarantine or community center facility. First building in 20 years.”

At the Beer Mug bar, Toce-Blount sang ‘80s karaoke from the end of a long table under balloons and lights. From the outside, it is hard to see that the bar is even open. But the inside was recently redone in black and gray, with new seats lining up against the counter.

Anthony Mazawasicuna, Toce-Blount’s biological son, sang along to “Never Gonna Give You Up” by Rick Astley playing on the TV screen. People came in dressed vintage, including Toce-Blount, who wore sparkling satin with a classic headband.

That night, family mingled in and out of the bar. Anthony and his brother Cole played pool on the other side of the single room. Her Medicine Brothers came too; most hopped over from other towns. In that moment, things felt perfect for Toce-Blount.

It won’t be this summer, but in the next year, she might be able to have a birthday in a new community center.

“Starting by the root is where we can grow; we can make this place beautiful,” Toce-Blount said. “The dream of having a cultural center is amazing, and I believe it is going to happen soon.” ♦



A school bus transports students to Lame Deer High School in March, 2021, when the school reopened.

School was out. But the shrill, electronic school bell drone blasted throughout Lame Deer High School. It should have been a short burst, but it went on for minutes.

The blast rang from the white, tile-shaped speaker situated in the ceiling of the athletic director's office. Senior basketball player and student Madison Doney sat among the clutter of the office, filled with freshly sanitized basketballs, golf clubs and shooting machines. She paused and cocked her head toward the ceiling.

"He must still be trying to get it right," Doney said with a laugh.

This was in March, only the second day of the school's reopening, and the first day they used the bell all year. Principal Byron Woods had forgotten to set the bell the day before, and was still trying to work out the kinks in a system that had been dormant since the start of the pandemic.

Woods' office is neat and tidy, with his impressive fat tire bike securely fastened to a towering stand. A Bob Ross Chia Pet smiles over his shoulder, its clay head still bald.

"Two weeks turned into another two weeks, and pretty soon it became apparent that we're not coming back," Woods said, recalling the early days of the pandemic.

Woods is coming up on the end of his second school year as principal. This is the first time the principal has seen all of the students in one place this school year. This day, in late March, was the culmination of a long, difficult journey taken on by him and his staff.

"I think everybody has been in survival mode," Woods said.

Lame Deer High School, situated a few miles down the main drag of Lame Deer, Montana, reopened in late March 2021. The first three days of reopening the school were treated like orientation days, with the real first day coming Thursday, March 25. Some remembered the halls from years past, others had never set foot in the building.

Lame Deer High School was one of the last schools to open in eastern Montana, teaching remotely through the pandemic. Without a school, the community found it had little to tie itself together. Gone were

the face-to-face interactions of teacher and student.

Gone also were the fundraisers, meetings, a lot of community that happens at schools, though perhaps most detrimental was the absence of sports.

During the continued struggle of the pandemic, schools needed help. Lame Deer High School, along with schools across the country, received CARES Act funding in the form of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER, funds. The CARES Act allocated \$13.5 billion nationwide for struggling schools, with more than \$41 million going to schools in Montana.

For students, this meant money to speed up the evolution from the printed paper packets full of busy work sent out in spring 2020 to the glowing screens of Google Chromebooks last fall.

Since the initial wave of funding arrived in March 2020, two additional ESSER pools have been filled. A second national injection came in December 2020 with over \$54 billion, and a third arrived in March with the passing of the American Rescue Plan Act. That third round

saw over \$122 billion allocated to the ESSER fund. Currently, the Montana Legislature is hammering out how to spend the combined \$552 million.

Woods said that they had built a plan, mostly from work done by athletic director August Scalpcane, to get the kids back by the fall of 2020. But the ever-increasing spread of COVID-19 within the small town of more than 2,000 kept the doors of Lame Deer High School shut.

As of April 2021, the Northern Cheyenne had accumulated 957 COVID-19 cases, with 46 deaths. Over 19% of the reservation has been affected by the virus.

"The teacher's union was concerned. We have an older staff, so that was a little scary," Woods said.

And so the kids were left to continue learning from a distance. Getting students to engage online was tough, teaching through a computer screen meant each student is likely surrounded by countless distractions. The halls, the classrooms where teachers can gauge student interaction, were forced to remain empty.

But Scalpcane had an idea: If they could safely have a basketball season with



Woods holds the yearbook dedicated to the class of 2020, his first graduating class as a principal. "I wanted to do something for them because they missed the end of their senior year," Woods said.

40 kids all together, they could bring back the community around school.

Doney, the center on the girls basketball team, would have her final first day of school almost seven months late. Doney had moved from the Fort Belknap reservation when she was in sixth grade and has been in the Lame Deer school system ever since.

She had big plans for her senior year. For the three-sport athlete, her main goal was to make the all-conference first team for basketball. But with the pandemic forcefully closing the door on the waning moments of her junior year and the bulk of her senior year, she, like many others, was left in a state of limbo.

"I don't feel like a senior," Doney said.

Doney, along with her classmates, experienced a year filled with isolation, depression, death and uncertainty of the future.

The effects of COVID-19 extended beyond its victims' health. Schools across Montana, and the U.S., faced a similar question in the fall of 2020: What is the risk of reopening? For some schools, like Ashland Public School and St. Labre Indian School, reopening, using a hybrid online and in-person model, came as early as the start of the new school year in the pandemic era.

In the case of Lame Deer, administra-

tors decided to use the \$260,000 to purchase Google Chromebooks, charging stations, laptop sanitizers, personal protective equipment and a touchscreen thermometer at the school entrance that greets visitors. Delivering two meals a day to students took a piece of the ESSER pie as well.

Much of the student body at both St. Labre and Ashland Public already had access to Chromebooks. Lame Deer was behind. Its Chromebooks would not come until the start of the new school

year. When the pandemic hit, teachers switched from classrooms to paper packets.

Gone were the interactions of teachers and students, replaced instead with a still, forgettable, piece of paper. Many students struggled with the packets. The motivation to actually get the work done was low. The school managed to deliver packets, along with two meals per day, to 98% of its students. Less than a third of the packets were returned.

Doney struggled as well. When school was closed, she and her friends were excited at first to get a break from the grind of the school year. But then she began to worry about her work.

"We still did everything normal, just no school," Doney said. "Until we finally started getting packets from the school. Everyone was still hyped about it, but me, I didn't have the motivation to work from home."

But for senior classmate Davinia Osife, who grew up in Lame Deer, the packets helped. She had struggled with getting to school on time prior to lockdown, but with no classroom to go to, attendance didn't matter.

"I think I was one of the only kids that was really doing my work," she said. "I kind of felt embarrassed."

Some of Osife's classmates would ask her for answers to the homework, but she usually declined. In the midst of the pandemic, educators expected grades to

drop. The true effects of the lost educational year are hard to quantify, thanks to a pause in testing on the state level.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Elsie Arntzen helped to make the disbursement of the ESSER funds easier for schools. The money would be held as if it were a bank, where schools provided a list of their needs and the funds would then become available.

"We needed to make sure that our system was verifiable," Arntzen said. "School districts can come in to say how they are allocating those dollars."

Arntzen said a pause in state testing came when it became apparent that kids being in-person across the state could vary from district-to-district, school-to-school.

"If children are not in school taking tests, then the results were going to be very varied," Arntzen said. "There would be very poor data, so we paused the tests — the federal government agreed to it."

This school year, the Office of Public Instruction is focusing on assessing children with any test data they have.

But every district has a different test and different results, which means there's no similar data points. Arntzen referred to the ability to compare them as "apples and oranges."



Lame Deer seventh- and eighth-grade students begin their orientation day, on March 22, 2021. The principal was so excited to have students in the building, he said he forgot to set the bell to signal transition periods for classes.

rived for the students of Lame Deer.

“We got every teacher doing online classes, every kid has a Chromebook,” Woods said. “For us that was a huge step, you know, one small step for the school and one giant step for the teachers.”

The laptops were supposed to be a light at the end of the tunnel, and for some students they were. But for some members of the staff, they showed a glaring gap in the faculty’s preparedness to teach online.

Sally King, an eighth grade science and English teacher, has been at Lame Deer for eight years. When the pandemic hit, she was worried how students who didn’t have the basic things to keep them safe — food, running water and electricity — would succeed away from in-person classes.

“My worry was for them, and how we were going to keep teaching them and having them still want to learn,” King said.

The arrival of the Chromebooks raised another concern for her.

“I had hoped our school would be more technologically advanced,” King said. “We just weren’t.”

Learning how to teach remotely was a task at first. Many of the teachers were older, and unfamiliar with using the laptops or Google Classroom. King said some were able to make the transition easily, while others struggled with learning the basics of the new technology.

By August, it appeared that school might be coming back, with the option for a hybrid model in the works. The decision to reopen was up to Woods. But then, athletic director and basketball coach August Scalpcane contracted COVID-19. Scalpcane had spent much of the summer interacting with kids, taking them boating, hiking — anything to get kids out from their homes. When the virus hit him, it hit hard.

Stories had been floating around about members of both the Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes not coming home after seeking medical attention.

“I told my son, ‘Don’t let them take me to the hospital,’” Scalpcane said. “He says ‘Why?,’ ‘Because they haven’t been coming home.’”

It got so bad that Scalpcane had to be taken to the ER. He bounced from the IHS clinic on the Crow reservation

to Billings, where he was nearly put on a ventilator.

Death came close for Scalpcane, with the doctor telling him his odds were 50/50.

“I had to tell him ‘I really don’t care if I make it or not. If I don’t make it I’ll be reunited with my son,’” Scalpcane said. “And if I do make it I’m blessed to stay here.”

Scalpcane’s positive case led Woods to keep the doors of Lame Deer closed. But he kept fighting, and made it through.

The administration at Ashland Public School also dealt with COVID-19 on-staff. Principal and superintendent Courtney Small contracted the virus around the same time as Scalpcane.

“I was trying to be a principal from home,” Small said.

While her symptoms were not as severe as Scalpcane’s, the virus spread through her home. Her son tested positive, but remained asymptomatic.

“My 10-year-old son asked ‘Mom, am I going to die?’,” Small said.

Ashland Public, similar to Lame Deer, offered online-only classes at the start of the year. By Oct. 26, 2020, they opened the doors and installed a hybrid option, where some students worked from home and others came in-person. By March 2021, the hybrid option was still in play. However, only 14 of its 68 students were using the online option.

Ashland public used a portion of its CARES Act funding in a unique way to keep kids safe while in-person. Desks enclosed with Plexiglas, divided into four smaller “cubbies,” acted like individualized pods for the kids to work out of. The nearly 2-foot-wide workspaces featured whiteboards as the desk surface. These desks, which were once lab tables, were retrofitted in-house by the school’s maintenance staff. Each cost over \$1,000 to produce.

By October 2020, Scalpcane was eager to try and get kids back into school. But at this time, cases began to steadily increase on the reservation, and the death toll began to grow.

Four Lame Deer High School staff members passed away from the coronavirus.



Madison Doney, a senior at Lame Deer High School, sits in front of the girls basketball team photos from the past 15 years. “I feel like I didn’t even have a senior year,” Doney said.

“When ball first started,
it was everything.
We all just come
together as a family”

- Madison Doney,
Lame Deer senior



Scott Gion, Lame Deer’s assistant principal, walks a student to her first in-person class of the day after she picked up her breakfast. The school provides two meals a day and a safe structured space for their students, Gion said.

For the staff and students left behind, picking up the pieces became all too familiar a practice.

The deaths of fellow staff members rocked counselor Betty Gion.

“In workplaces you become family,” she said. “It’s like that person at staff meetings always sat in that chair at the library. And it’s that empty chair.”

Gion has been a counselor at Lame Deer for over four years, and has worked in schools throughout Indian Country for over 20 years. Much of her time at Lame Deer had been spent helping students develop coping skills and deal with anxiety.

COVID-19 deaths in Lame Deer stayed low until November. Between then and February 2021, the death toll increased every day, with more and more elders slipping away. Many of the elders that passed were the ones raising students at Lame Deer. Some kids were not sure where they were going to live.

“When you lose elderly people, they are the rock of the family,” Gion said. “And probably the ones actually raising our students. And we had students that when that grandparent died, they had no place

to go. That became really scary for them, you know, ‘Who’s going to take care of me?’”

Doney’s great uncle, who lived in Fort Belknap, passed away as well. She said he had been in the hospital for nearly four weeks.

“And next thing you know, he couldn’t take it no more. I was shook, COVID takes even healthy people,” she said. “It’s so random how it came.”

Doney contracted COVID-19 in the summer as well, but the only symptoms she experienced were loss of taste and smell.

Rosalie Birdwoman, a Cheyenne language and culture teacher at Lame Deer High School, with the help of Gion, sent out a message about grief and how to handle it.

“I know about grief, I’ve been a licensed addiction counselor for 31 years,” Birdwoman said. “I would tell them, ‘It’s normal, there’s nothing wrong with grieving. It’s part of life.’”

Her grandmother told her that the Cheyenne people, and everyone, should only grieve for four seasons, and when

that year mark rolls around, they need to let that person go. She had heard many stories about people not being able to let go, where they would visit the graves of those they had lost and stayed overnight.

“What about your other kids? Other family members? That person is not the only one,” she said.

As the pandemic intensified on the reservation, Birdwoman turned to sweating to cope with the environment around her. People would join her, masked and maintaining their distance. Oftentimes, visitors would bring a spare mask for when the disposable ones became too sweat-soaked.

Heading into winter, she said that the death toll continued to rise. The bodies would go straight from the morgue to the graveyard.

That’s when she decided to write “Hard Times,” a poetic rumination on the challenges that come with loss and grief. The idea came from a conversation with an elder friend who likened the restrictions borne from the pandemic to those that prisoners face, shackled to a bench and kept hidden away behind windowless walls.



August Scalpcane, Lame Deer School’s athletic director and boys’ basketball coach, sits on the bleachers in the gym. According to Scalpcane, the school’s decision to have a basketball season helped Lame Deer come back to school in person.



ABOVE: Derwin Walker, left, and Dakira Moore, students at Ashland Public K-8, sit in their Plexiglas divided desk cubbies during school. According to Courtney Small, superintendent at Ashland Public School, both third graders had been back to school in a hybrid model since Oct. 26, 2020 and had adapted to this new normal.



LEFT: Nahshon Bighorn, a senior at Lane Deer High School, stands at the entrance to the school. Bighorn wore a mask honoring his friend who passed away in November of 2020.

“The thing I really like about Lane Deer is that it’s not just student-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, it’s like a family”
- Nahshon Bighorn, junior

She wrote that what the Northern Cheyenne were experiencing was only temporary. Soon they would be able to return to normal, but first they had to survive the hard times.

Scalpcane wanted that return to normal more than anything for the kids at Lane Deer. His best bet was to open the basketball gym. In Indian Country, basketball is everything. He knew it would be difficult, especially as blame began to fall on the kids, with many labeling them as superspreaders.

He knew that they needed to walk first before they ran. The superintendent reached out and asked him if he thought they were losing connection with the kids. “We ain’t losing them, we lost them,” Scalpcane said.

With help from Woods, Scalpcane opened the gym for a shootaround. He knew that being back on the court would become a magnetic force that drew kids back in. The Northern Cheyenne tribe ordered procedures be put in place to make sure kids were being socially distant and safe. At first he only allowed a couple students in at a time. But word spread and soon the gym was packed.

By November 2020, teachers began asking Woods and Scalpcane if students could come see them in their classrooms and get extra help. At first it was just at-risk students, the ones struggling with learning online, trickling into the classrooms. But that trickle turned into a river.

King said they had students scheduled Monday through Thursday to maintain social distancing. The magnetism of the classroom and school brought in more than she expected.

“Our classes would just get filled up, it looked like I had a full class walking down the hallway for lunch,” King said. “I feel like it is a safe, clean place for them, and it is something that they know.”

Nahshon Bighorn, a junior, was one of the students that came in for extra help. He transferred from St. Labre Indian School at the start of the school year. He came to Lane Deer High School to take advantage of its dual credit program, which allows students to attend Chief Dull Knife College while taking classes at the high school.

It was hard for him to get adjusted to being home all the time during the pandemic. His anxiety and depression became worse.

“Everything just got higher, it just seemed like I was more isolated, more alone, because I was just so used to seeing friends,” Bighorn said. “Being able to have these new opportunities at Lane Deer really helped.”

He began to fall behind in English while trying to catch up with his online work. But when students were allowed to come face-to-face, it helped him regain motivation. He said being able to get back into the classroom during that trial period really helped take pressure off of his shoulders.

“The thing I really like about Lane Deer is that it’s not just student-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, it’s like a family,” Bighorn said.

The great basketball experiment began. If they could have kids coming into the gym and into the classrooms, could they have a basketball season?

“I didn’t want to see the kids miss the season,” Woods said. “They deserve this. It felt almost like a punishment that they didn’t get to play.”

And so Scalpcane made the push to get the basketball season rolling. Some parents argued it was a bad idea, others supported it. The season would go on for both the boys and girls teams. It was rocky at first, with both teams struggling.

During the summer, Doney, like many of her friends, would still sneak off to hang out and see one another. During this time she said she slacked off on her training for basketball, opting to not go on runs and watch Netflix instead.

She came into the season out of shape, but by the end she made second team all-conference.

“When ball first started, it was everything,” Doney said. “We just all came together as a family.”

Before the pandemic, games at Lane Deer High School would typically sell out. The gym would be packed to the brim with eager, cheering fans. This year, all was quiet except for the sounds of rubber squeaking and pounding off the hardwood.



Doney receives suggestions from her art teacher Susan Wolfe during her first art class back. Doney said that as an art class veteran she decided to make her own graduation announcements instead of the assigned project.

Bighorn, a center as well, reflected on the return of the season as something to look forward to.

“There’s the brotherhood of the team, but there’s also the love of the community behind us,” Bighorn said.

Scalpcane coached the girls team and had been with them since they were young. The start of the season was a struggle for Doney, with her numbers down and the team trying to find cohesion in their playing. Midway through the season, the boys coach quit. Scalpcane jumped over to their team, coaching them all the way to a dazzling five-point loss to defending state champions Lodge Grass.

“Once he left to coach the boys, we all just kind of fell apart,” Doney said.

The girls would face another detour in their season when a positive COVID-19 test quarantined the whole team. They were away from the gym for two weeks, but continued to work out to stay in-shape for the few remaining games. But then came a new head coach, a former assistant under Scalpcane who had worked with the girls throughout junior high.

With a new coach, Doney said everything turned around. They too made it to districts and battled against Lodge Grass, taking their rivals to double overtime but ultimately falling short. It was the only

game they had that year with a loud and passionate crowd.

“Holy cow everyone was getting wild, especially that last overtime,” Doney said “Everyone was screaming.”

The experiment created by Scalpcane and Woods worked. They had a season without spreading COVID-19 throughout the school. The last time both teams had been together was during the season, now with the school reopening, everyone would be together.

Doney said she was nervous about coming back. Mostly because she was going

to have to get used to waking up on time again. She, like Bighorn, is dual enrolled at Chief Dull Knife college. She spends the first part of her day there.

And on her full first day back at Lane Deer, she was sitting in her favorite place, the art room.

It was the first time she had been in that room since the pandemic hit. Art is her favorite subject, and one of the few items from her packet that she ever turned in. She was working on a print design for her graduation announcements.

It was her last first day. ♦

Additional reporting by Hazel Cramer



KEEPING THE KEEPERS

Defending tribal knowledge
by protecting elders

Story by Jordan Unger
Photos by Sierra Cistone

Carole Racine works on a puzzle in the common area of the Blackfeet Eagle Shield Center in Browning. Residents have been unable to mingle and socialize during the pandemic and have largely been isolated in their rooms except for one-person activities.

A wooden teepee stands tall, drawing attention in the otherwise vacant Pikuni Walking Park in Browning, Montana. More than a dozen narrow poles coalesce to form the framework of the skeletal structure.

For stability, a strand of rope wraps around the upper meeting point of the stakes and connects to an anchor point on the barren ground below. White ribbons with black cursive scrawling loosely cling to each leg of the structure, juxtaposing the lackluster hues of the wood. One ribbon reads, “Cynthia Kipp.”

Kipp was 84 when she died from COVID-19 on Nov. 13, 2020. A tribal historian and former Blackfeet tribal business councilwoman, Kipp was also a mother, grandmother and great-grand-

one generation to the next.

“I think over 3,589 elders passed away in this last year,” said Larry Curley, the executive director of the National Indian Council on Aging, Inc., a nonprofit focused on addressing the needs of aging American Indians. “That represents over 233,000 years of traditions, customs, language and culture that we have lost. That we will never recover. Never will.”

Nationwide, the loss of culture, language and experience found in elderly populations was taken seriously by tribes and advocates.

For instance, the Cherokee Nation, the largest tribe in the country, prioritized Cherokee language speakers among the highest, right next to emergency workers, in its vaccine rollout.

“Over 3,589 elders passed away in this last year. That represents over 233,000 years of traditions, customs, language and culture that we have lost that we will never recover”

-Larry Curley, the executive director of the
National Indian Council on Aging

mother.

Another ribbon reads, “Elizabeth Lee Grant Edwards.”

For Edwards’ niece, Amy Rae Grant, the passing of her aunt, a traditional Blackfeet dancer, felt surreal. “My heart still hurts. I cry about it every day,” she said.

In total, 48 ribbons are stapled to the structure. Each one honors the name of a Blackfeet tribal member lost to the pandemic.

While the impact and loss from the deadly coronavirus across the country cannot be understated, its toll on Indian Country represented more: A direct threat to the preservation of tribes’ way of life.

The virus disproportionately targeted Indigenous and elderly populations. This demographic in tribal communities holds an invaluable status as gatekeepers of language and traditions, helping pass the baton of culture and way of life from

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana similarly prioritized fluent speakers for the vaccine, an ever-pressing concern as there are only 12 fluent Kootenai language speakers and 13 fluent Salish speakers left among a tribal population of over 8,000.

Confronted with a virus that threatened to attack elderly knowledge keepers, Montana’s tribal nations – from Blackfeet to Rocky Boy’s to Flathead – utilized CARES Act funding and grassroots initiatives to protect their people.

Businesses closed. Schools moved online. Government services shut down. On reservations, borders tightened and curfews were imposed.

Across the state, assisted living facilities and nursing homes went into lockdown with residents urged to stay in their rooms.

These protective measures were echoed among tribal communities.

The Blackfeet Nation utilized the \$38



ABOVE: Karen Arcand, 79, a resident at the Blackfeet Eagle Shield Center, gazes out a window in her apartment. Her daughter has delivered a steady supply of groceries and essentials through Arcand's window.

BELOW: Amy Rae Grant of Browning holds the memorial card of her aunt, Elizabeth Lee Grant Edwards, who passed away from COVID-19 on New Year's Eve in 2020. Pandemic restrictions kept Grant's family from holding the ceremonial wake that would be a time for healing.

million they received from CARES Act funding with a keen interest in keeping their people safe and, after reaching an agreement with the National Park Service, closed the eastern entrance to Glacier National Park for the tourism season.

Inside the Blackfeet Eagle Shield Center, a senior citizen complex in Browning, the building remains eerily quiet. The complex used the nearly \$100,000 it received in CARES Act money to upgrade infrastructure in its housing units.

"I was very scared, and we did take caution," said Zana McDonald, the center's executive director. "We just absolutely did not let anybody in the building at all. Nobody. Except for us workers."

Northwest of Browning, along the St. Mary River, the mountains of Glacier National Park penetrate the skyline of Babb — a small farming and ranching community.

In this remote area of the Blackfeet Nation, Charlene Bird Burns, a ceremonial leader, lives with her husband. They have more than 60 grandchildren and

great-grandchildren together.

"We did our best to survive. My husband's 78, and I'm 71. He has a lot of knowledge that we really have to protect, especially in our area out here," Burns said. "He's a historian of this area. And so, the knowledge that he has is really important."

As Burns recalls, Indigenous people have been through comparable, culture-threatening catastrophes before. Smallpox. Tuberculosis. The Dawes Act, which attempted to push Native Americans to adopt European American culture in the 1880s by criminalizing Indigenous cultural practices.

"We are mentally strong. We've been through this," Burns said. "This history is still in our DNA. All the epidemics are raw in our memory."

In a twist of incongruity, elders' vulnerable status often served to push them into further isolation. Yet, for Burns and her husband, it was evident what was necessary to get through the pandemic: simply sit still and wait.

Their home normally functioned as a social hub for the Babb community, a phenomenon put to a screeching halt with the onset of COVID-19. Noteworthy events, like the family's New Year's Eve karaoke party and a baby shower, were pushed online.

The tribe, as well as family, stepped up to deliver necessities such as food, household items and medicine.

Yet Burns and her family were not immune from hearing the news of the 48 Blackfeet deaths attributed to COVID-19.

"For us, every one of those losses is personal because we think collectively," Burns said. "We've learned how to survive by helping one another. And in this case, we had to help one another by staying put and not being part of carrying the germ to one another."

A year defined by the pandemic, overall, translated into a year of strict isolation. But in the face of physical restrictions, the Blackfeet, and other Indigenous communities, found innovative ways to continue sharing their culture throughout the pandemic.

A Blackfeet language class taught over Zoom by a North Piegan Blackfoot



Charlene Bird Burns, left, gathers her daughter and grandkids outside her home. Now that Burns and the adults of her family are fully vaccinated, she said she finally feels comfortable gathering and being close to her family.

member in Canada, Leonard Bastien, boomed in popularity.

"We had like 500 people sign up for it" said Wendy Bremner, one of Burns' daughters. "Just people from all over the place. Blackfeet live everywhere. And so, a lot of them are tapping into it. We found a way to really connect with each other even though it was during a pandemic, and we're all isolated."

For Burns, the language class and pandemic served to highlight how valuable everyone in the community is to one another.

"One elder was teaching us the word how you say, 'I love you.' And then how to say, 'I love you too.' You know, how to say it back. And she told us [to] use

this word daily. This is the one that you need to say daily," Burns said. "And so, I would say even though it separated us, it brought us closer together as far as how we value one another."

The first doses of the vaccine arrived onto the Blackfeet Nation toward the end of December 2020, the first sign that the long phase of isolation might slowly recede.

When the vaccine needle plunged into Burns' arm, it was a moment of instant relief. She compared the significance of the moment to acquiring a shield.

"We believe in our spiritual ways of putting on a shield," Bremner said. "That's why we smudge. And a lot of the things we do is like putting a shield over

ourselves. And so, they [elders] were equating the immunization to putting on a shield to protect yourself."

A report from April 2021 released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attributed the Blackfeet Nation's strict stay-at-home orders and face covering mandates with a 33-fold reduction in coronavirus cases between September and November of 2020, pointing to the effectiveness of the tribe's mitigation measures.

As of late spring of this year, an estimated 95% of tribal members of the Blackfeet Nation have received the vaccine. The tribe has stepped into Phase 3 of its COVID-19 plan, dubbed "New Normal."

Normalcy indeed seems to be crawling back after the emotional year.

On a sunny, mid-March Sunday at Burns' house, family members crowded around a kitchen table while others occupied various seats in the living room. Burns, in the heat of the kitchen, was busy cooking pancakes and bacon for breakfast. A commonplace gathering like this had not happened in about a year.

Across the state, on the remote plains of north-central Montana, the Chippewa Cree Tribe on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation enacted similar safety precautions to protect the elderly. The Chippewa Cree Tribal Business



Charlene Bird Burns, left, and her daughter Wendy Bremner stand outside Burns' home in Babb on March 14, 2021. Bremner and Burns have been able to visit only briefly on the porch during the pandemic.



Burns, center, her daughter Wendy Bremner and Bremner's son, Dakota Running Crane, share a laugh at the breakfast table in Burns' home for the first time in a year.

Committee declared a state of emergency due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus on March 16, 2020. Days later, Rocky Boy's became the first community in Montana to place checkpoints at the entries to its borders.

The emergency declaration, however, was the second issued within a year's time.

In August 2019, months before COVID-19 emerged, the business committee had declared a different state of emergency addressing the loss of the Chippewa and Cree languages.

To protect those at risk in their community, the tribe utilized over \$20 million they were allocated through the CARES Act to combat the pandemic and its life-altering reverberations.

A public safety enforcement program utilized \$2.24 million to address COVID-related public safety challenges and hired extra security personnel to maintain borders and enforce the stay-at-home mandate.

With \$163,000, the tribe offered extra firewood to elderly tribal members to provide a lifeline during northcentral Montana's harsh winters.

The tribe also used \$179,000 to help ensure low-income seniors and those on Medicare received care through a senior

citizens health and safety program.

Due to their remote location, another \$112,000 was directed to install an emergency fuel station in an attempt to limit travel outside the tribal territory.

Yet, like mold proliferating in a concealed container, the microscopic virus permeated the tight safety measures, targeting those holding onto already threatened languages and traditions.

At his Rocky Boy's residence on Aug. 5, 2020, Merle Tendoy, 63, passed away.

A respected elder and cultural advisor, Tendoy also held an important role as powwow emcee.

Robert Murie, one of Tendoy's brothers and a language instructor at Stone Child College, recalls his brother's good heart and knowledge as among his most prominent attributes.

"He really had a lot of good, wonderful stories about the creation story," Murie said. "He was gifted that way." Tendoy was well respected for his knowledge and because he lived his life around ceremonial teachings, Murie said. "He walked that road of life."

It is Tendoy's voice, though, that Murie particularly remembers when thinking of his brother.

"He knew a lot of cultural songs, beautiful songs. Never did I see him

mad, screaming out of anger. I never did," Murie said. "The only time I heard him using a voice kind of loud was his singing. He had a beautiful voice."

Dustin Whitford, the executive director of the Mahchiwminahnahtik Chippewa and Cree Language Revitalization nonprofit on Rocky Boy's, believes Tendoy was the first COVID-19 fatality to hit the Chippewa Cree tribe.

"It was a major loss because of his knowledge that he had about traditions, customs, ceremonies and the language," Whitford said. "His presence is really missed."

Tendoy was one of less than 100 fluent Cree speakers remaining, according to Whitford.

At the end of February 2021, tragedy would strike again on Rocky Boy's with the passing of Duncan Standing Rock Sr., an elder who worked with the Chippewa Cree Tribal Cultural Preservation Department.

Standing Rock Sr. was one of only an estimated two or three fluent Chippewa speakers left.

For Clyde Brown, the language revitalization center's treasurer, these two emergencies coalescing have been nothing short of an existential threat.

"I knew numbers [of fluent speakers]

were low, throw in COVID and it kind of sped everything up," Brown said. "So, not only were we in a state of emergency before COVID, now we're really in a state of emergency, not only health wise. Right now, I think we're just kind of trying to figure out how we can survive all this."

Home of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Flathead Indian Reservation occupies a checkerboard territory of tribal and non-tribal people interspersed predominantly in Lake County.

The tribes fought to protect their people, but the area was not immune to the lethal virus. As of April 14, 2021, there have been 2,125 reported COVID-19 cases in Lake County, 42% of which were tribally affiliated.

Alan "Chauncey" Beaverhead, 59, who passed away in late 2020, was among a shrinking demographic of fluent speakers on the Flathead reservation.

For Mary Jane Charlo and Myrna Dumontier, prominent tribal elders, the significance of losing Beaverhead during the pandemic is difficult to overstate.

"The equivalent is a library burning down," Dumontier said. "Chauncey was

a very quiet man. But if you really wanted the heart of an answer to a cultural question, he knew it. He was one of two people that we had left like that."

To protect their most at-risk demographic, the tribes provided meat, medicine and other essentials for the elderly as they remained isolated at home.

"It was a rough, rough year," said Charlo, who spent a large portion of her time during the pandemic doing beadwork.

Elders were identified and given signs to place on their front door as a means to notify others not to enter.

However, according to Dumontier, fear plagued many tribal members.

"At first it felt like paralysis. We were all scared to do anything," she said. "Our kids were saying you can't come, and my grandkids are saying we can't come over. That hit me. That was hard."

With more than \$44 million in CARES Act assistance, the tribes directed nearly \$1 million to a multimedia communications campaign, "Who's at Risk," to raise awareness about protecting the tribes' vulnerable elderly population.

The campaign used billboards, videos and radio messages stressing the importance of COVID-19 safety precautions.

Shadow Deveraux, a hip-hop artist, was commissioned to make a song and music video to highlight the importance of protecting elders.

"I named the song 'Protect Your People.' It was just about protecting our elders and making sure the youth take it seriously," Deveraux said. "It was super important to me after I started writing it."

For many tribal elders, one of the most difficult aspects has been the ongoing disruption of community events — the Bitterroot Feast, powwows, the river honoring, language camps, family get-togethers. Ceremonial gatherings, in general, have been scarce.

"We're hungry for those times, Dumontier said. "We're hungry to gather and be together."

Stephen Small Salmon, 81, and his wife, Juanita, have felt similarly isolated and disconnected over the past year.

"It's been a long, hard year for me. Part of it was a little bit of fear and being so isolated," Juanita Small Salmon said.



"Tribal people are so used to getting together and celebrating. The dancing and the drums and the singing, it keeps them going. I have never felt quite right since we didn't have the Arlee Powwow."

After helping found the Nkwusm Salish Immersion School in Arlee nearly two decades ago, Stephen Small Salmon, a fluent Salish speaker, has fought to keep the language and traditions alive. Waiting out the pandemic, Small Salmon is often reminded of the elders that preceded him.

"They used to say something is going to come through because we're not taking care of this world," he said.

Most evenings, with this in mind, Small Salmon finds himself sitting on his porch, taking in the beauty of his natural surroundings and reflecting on the state of the pandemic. When completely clear of the coronavirus' shadow, there is one thing in particular he looks forward to.

"Life," he said. "For the elders, you know, we have to enjoy the rest of our lives." ♦



ABOVE: Mary Jane Charlo, left, and Myrna Dumontier embrace outside of Charlo's home in Arlee on March 20, 2021. The lifelong friends received their vaccinations together and are looking forward to life after the pandemic.

BELOW: Stephen Small Salmon sits in his home in Ronan on March 14, 2021. Small Salmon has been teaching Salish language classes from his home since the pandemic began.

INVESTING IN CONNECTION

Blackfeet Nation gains independence through telecoms

Story by Meghan Jonas

Photos by Liliana Acosta

The benefits of mountain living are obvious and plentiful: Theda New Breast has lived on the eastern side of Lower St. Mary’s Lake for 26 winters. She sees the first fissures in the frozen lake and she hypothesizes how and where it will collapse. She walks past bear dens. Moose cross her front yard.

The detriments of mountain living are slim but monumental: New Breast cannot rely on her cell service or internet access, leaving her particularly remote and vulnerable whenever the wind, winter or tourist season takes away the little signal she has, removing her from the rest of her community and the world.

As much of the United States dove head-first into new technologies, New Breast, and the rest of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, were being left behind. And as the country settles in with high-speed broadband, with many communities already using fiber-to-home technology, the Blackfeet Nation is just now catching up, still trying to cross the inherently unequal digital divide.

New Breast remembers when they dug the first landline for her phone, itself now a technological relic. That was in 1997; 26 years ago.

The line is still there, although physically delicate. New Breast explains that the pink streamers tied to tree branches along the road to her home are there to prevent the winter plows from severing the phone line.

The internet is so unreliable, it’s practically science fiction.

“We have drinking water,” New Breast said. “But it’s also internet access. It’s just as important as water. It’s like, we need water to survive our new world. We need the internet to survive. Yeah, it’s like a utility. And it should be fair.”

In a world that has become more and



Theda New Breast sits at her designated "Zoom area," where she does most of her work since she is unable to travel. She surrounds herself with items that bring her joy, and makes sure she is Zoom ready. "I always put on lipstick and earrings for my calls," New Breast said.

more digital, it’s becoming increasingly important to have quality access to the internet. But according to a 2019 FCC report on broadband deployment in Indian Country, only 47% of homes on rural tribal lands have access to a fixed broadband service. There are 10,000 people living on the Blackfeet reservation. Of those, about 1,000 live in Browning, which leave most of the reservation’s population living in rural communities.

Phone and internet access used to be seen as a privilege. However, the pandemic has exposed virtual connection as an absolute essential. It has also exposed the inequality of access in Montana, which has far-reaching impacts on education and economic development, as well as personal wellbeing.

For instance, similarly remote communities like Big Sky and Ennis have been enjoying state-of-the-art fiber-to-home installations for years. However, the Blackfeet Nation has been using a decaying copper system. The digital divide that separates those with access from those without has long been a problem in Indian Country.

A combination of the Blackfeet Nation’s business arm, Siyeh Corporation, and federal CARES Act money, a response to the pandemic and its impact throughout the nation, has opened new opportunities to close the digital divide for the Blackfeet.

The tribe recieved \$38.6 million in CARES Act funding, \$7.5 million of which went to the telecoms project.

The Blackfeet Nation now hopes to be back in the driver’s seat, providing connectivity to people like New Breast, who have never had quality cell service or internet access while living on the Blackfeet reservation.

The process of getting quality technology to those living on the Blackfeet reservation is 20 years in the making, Siyeh Corporation CEO Dennis Fitzpatrick said.

The Siyeh Corporation formed in 1999 as the business arm of the tribal council with the intent of separating business development from political influence. It was profitable after taking over management of the tribe’s Bingo Hall.

In 2000, the corporation set its sights on the digital divide and started a cable TV service throughout the Blackfeet region, marking the beginning of what would become the current telecommunications project, Fitzpatrick said.

Siyeh joined forces with Turtle Island Communications, eventually managing to secure a \$500,0000 grant from the Shakop-

“It was kind of to the point where we were asking, who’s going to invest in this community?”
- Dennis Fitzpatrick, Siyeh Corp.

ee Mdewakanton Sioux Community out of Minnesota, which helped as Siyeh acquired the Browning Telephone Exchange from 3 Rivers Cooperative, including its rights to provide telecoms services in the area, as required by the FCC.

The Blackfeet Nation is now in the process of providing high-speed broadband throughout the reservation. New Breast, who lives just outside of the Browning Telephone Exchange, should see her internet improve as Siyeh Communications technicians update their decaying copper system with fiber, providing over 1,000 times more bandwidth and 100 times faster speeds.

David Gibson, CEO and general manager of 3 Rivers, said that the Browning Exchange was going to be upgraded eventually, but that the Blackfeet Tribal Business

Council had asked them to hold off as the Siyeh Corporation started looking at becoming the telecommunications carrier of the area. However, negotiations with newly-formed Siyeh Communications began in 2018, a decade after 3 Rivers had started upgrading other, smaller exchanges with fiber-to-home. Today, 22 of the 25 exchanges 3 Rivers operates have been fully upgraded with fiber-to-home.

Siyeh Communications has already begun the work of improving access for its community as it awaits the closing of the 3 Rivers deal in early summer.

“It was kind of to the point where we were asking, who’s going to invest in this community,” Fitzpatrick said.

Verna Billedeaux has spent 22 years, her entire life, in Duck Lake, Montana. It’s a life she loves, where she can walk less than a mile to family members’ homes or walk down to work at her cousin’s businesses, Suzie’s Store and the Leaning Tree Cafe. During the summer, she’s a businesswoman taking Glacier National Park tourists on trail rides. But in her two decades in Duck Lake, she’s never had internet access.

If she wants to talk to her friends on Snapchat, many of whom are located in Browning where she went to high school, she has to wait at least an hour for their messages to load. She can text most days, but there are also long stretches of time where cell service goes out. This would be difficult for anyone living through an isolating, and often devastating, pandemic. That isolation becomes much worse when people are confined to rural communities with little communication with those outside of their own homes.

“Living in the country, the pandemic wasn’t that big of a deal,” Billedeaux said. She was still able to see her family and do the things she loved. But she missed seeing her friends. And when North American Indian Days, the four-day event held in Browning, got canceled, the disappointment of not being able to see her community stung. She was planning on attending an electrical apprentice program in Great Falls but was unable to attend when the pandemic hit.

Yes, it was hard to text and watch Netflix, which may seem trivial, but in a year that has been isolating for many, reliable internet and cell service allowed people to stay



ABOVE: Siyeh Corporation CEO Dennis Fitzpatrick sits in his office explaining the corporation’s long journey to start Siyeh Communications.

BELOW: Melvin Yawakie, head of Turtle Island Communications, works with his technicians to install new fiber in the 3 Rivers building.

connected and provide a sense of sanity amidst uncertainty.

Her service becomes even worse during the summer months when tourists flood to Glacier National Park, taking up the finite bandwidth on the Blackfeet reservation.

Billedeaux’s brother, Tal, Zooms into Browning High School most of the day. He gets one hour off for lunch, and gets marked absent by teachers when he has to go do chores that are vital for the survival of his family’s ranching business.

“The teachers don’t understand the work we do,” Verna said. “If we lose a calf, that’s \$600 down the drain.”

If he didn’t have a school-issued Jetpack which acts as a hotspot and was paid for with CARES Act funding, he wouldn’t be able to attend his classes at all. And even then, Jetpacks fail, forcing the family to operate off of a single hotspot.

The Leaning Tree Cafe and Suzie’s Store where Billedeaux works are the only businesses in Duck Lake open year-round, says owner Triston Fitzgerald. Both stores operate off of HughesNet, using satellites rather than fixed cables or wireless carriers.

“It’s pretty slow and frustrating,” Fitzgerald said.

Occasionally, their whole system, which

operates almost entirely on the internet, will go down, forcing it to go into offline mode. If they have to update anything, they have to drive to Browning or Great Falls where the internet signal is consistent.

There have been times when Billedeaux finished a trail ride, tried to charge her customers for her service, discovered the internet was down, and didn't get paid at all.

Chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council Tim Davis heard the word radio defined by a fluent Blackfeet speaker as iakiinaan, translating to "spirit of truth." Davis and the rest of the Council know the profound impact that comes from telecommunications access, allowing people to connect with the rest of the world and pull themselves out of poverty.

Davis, who grew up in rural Starr School, remembers when transistor radios were the most advanced technology on the reservation. His grandmother, who lived east of Browning, didn't get running water or electricity until the '60s. Davis has seen how far technology on the reservation has come.

Davis knows the importance of technology firsthand. His son had a difficult time coping with the challenges of being in school online, struggling to turn in papers or connect with professors virtually.

Davis' mother was able to FaceTime with family members from her nursing home. She died of COVID-19 shortly after. Davis and his family treasure the moments they got to spend with her, even if it was virtual. They were lucky. They had the internet, connecting them with their loved ones. Many still don't have that access. "It's hard to fathom what being isolated like that is like," Davis said.

According to Davis and Siyeh Communications general manager Mike Sheard, 3 Rivers was allotted federal funding for rural development of broadband. But, Davis says, "We were kind of like, what would you say, last on the totem pole there for development."

The Blackfeet Nation used \$8 million in CARES Act funding to purchase the Browning telephone exchange and build a fueling station in Heart Butte, helping the large majority of the community that is rural.

"Without that investment, we probably would still be here with outdated technology and antiquated equipment on the front



Chairman Tim Davis stands outside of the Glacier Peak Casino March 17, 2021. Though Davis grew up in rural Starr School and has seen the tension between new and old in his community, he believes the new technology will be beneficial in many ways. "The new technology is a good thing for our people, for better education and business owners," he said.

lines," Davis said. Fitzpatrick agrees, estimating that the purchase would have been delayed at least two years — a lifetime — for rapidly developing technology.

The technology that Siyeh Communications has begun to provide, whether that's fiber-to-home or a simple wireless internet installation, is vital. The work they've done, including fiber installations, impacts a variety of community members, allowing a rancher to check the price of feed, providing a school-age child with additional resources, letting a remote community member use telehealth, or helping a local business reach customers outside of their community.

Technician Lockley Bremner has been

working for Siyeh Communications since 2006, back when it was still Oki Communications. He says the process of getting quality internet to those on the Blackfeet reservation is slow-moving, but he's seen it accelerate in the last two years with the 3 Rivers purchase.

Bremner is one of Siyeh Communications' most dedicated employees, says general manager Mike Sheard. Bremner grew up in Browning, so he understands the needs of the community better than most.

Sheard is excited about helping provide quality internet access on the Blackfeet reservation, but he's just as excited about creating jobs for Siyeh Communications.

"It's exactly part of what we want to do,"



Verna Billedeaux, 22, owns a horse-back trail ride business and has lived in Duck Lake all her life. She planned to move to Great Falls to attend an electrical apprentice program, but once the pandemic started she was unable to attend remotely.

he said. "I mean, this is about more than just bringing much needed services to the Blackfeet reservation. It's about creating jobs."

Sheard was recently able to send out a job offer to a potential employee that had moved away from Browning to work in Flathead County. He missed his home and wanted to come back to raise his family, Sheard said. And now, if he accepts the job offer, he can.

Siyeh Communications is stimulating the economy in more ways than one, Sheard said. Not only are they providing jobs, but they're also looking forward to reinvesting their profits back into the community.

"Broadband has impacts outside of education. It can pull people out of poverty. It's an equalizer," Fitzpatrick said. "It provides opportunities that aren't necessarily here in this town."

One family that has already felt the positive impacts of quality internet access is Conrad and Mary Ellen LaFromboise, who live in Starr School. Bremner installed better wireless internet in their home on the morning of March 16, and the couple



Siyeh Communications technician Lockley Bremner walks by the water towers in Starr School, where a newly installed transmitter connects to antennas in Browning, providing Wi-Fi for Starr School.

could already tell the difference.

While sitting with Bremner and Sheard, Mary Ellen and Conrad talked about the increase in speed they were already experiencing, showing the difference between it and the Wi-Fi they had installed in 2010.

Many people living on the Blackfeet reservation don't know what they're missing out on, say Bremner and Sheard. They may think their landline or old cable television is good enough, they said. But they

still deserve the option of having the technology that the rest of the country has.

Both Conrad and Mary Ellen are technically retired, although they still work as consultants for their business LaFromboise Associates. And with retirement comes hopeful relaxation. Their daughter sent them a Roku stick, but they hadn't gotten it hooked up yet. So far, they were enjoying finding ways to watch their favorite shows.

"We're just finding out you can order

stuff on Amazon," Conrad said. "It's too damn easy."

But it hasn't all been easy. In the past year, 11 members of Mary Ellen's family died from COVID-19. Many of them lived in Starr School, but the family was unable to grieve together. Mary Ellen says that's been the hardest part of the pandemic.

In the last four or five months, Mary Ellen and Conrad have been able to virtually attend live-stream memorials. It made all

the difference.

"It made everybody feel better," Mary Ellen said. "We actually see each other and talk. It's everything. I think that's what just really hurt people, not being able to gather and comfort each other and do all those things that make a death easier to get through. I couldn't do it without the internet." ♦

INNER STRENGTH

Healing a mental health crisis through culture



Ryle Monteau sits in a car outside his home in Hays, Montana, on the Fort Belknap reservation. Since the 2019 youth suicide epidemic, young people on the reservation have found solace in their culture.

Story by Bowman Leigh
Photos by Sarah Mosquera

Along the edge of her right forearm, 20-year-old Miquela Perez has two black dragonfly tattoos. About two inches long, the dragonflies look almost identical. A thin blue outline gives each one a slight glow and they look as if they're flying together in the same direction. The images on Perez's arm are in memo-

ry of two friends who died by suicide. Dragonflies, for her, hold a special significance. "They can carry angels on their backs, you know, because they have an extra set of wings," she said, adding that ever since she got the tattoos, she only sees dragonflies in twos. Perez is one of many tribal members



Miquela Perez, a Nakoda language teacher on the Fort Belknap reservation, remembers struggling with depression after losing three friends to suicide. Despite her grief, she found strength by reconnecting with her culture.



Reyna Perez admires her daughter's artwork from across the dinner table. Miquela uses her iPad to create illustrations of tribal members in traditional clothing.

on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation whose life has been impacted by suicide. In the summer of 2019, a youth suicide crisis emerged on the reservation, prompting the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council to declare a state of emergency. Eight months later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Through the CARES Act, the council received over \$14.4 million in pandemic relief — the smallest amount distributed to any of Montana's eight federally recognized tribes. Facing the uncertainty of COVID-19, the council did not allocate any funds to youth mental health despite the recent suicide crisis. Steve Fox, Jr., secretary treasurer, said this decision was based on an understanding that Indian Health Service — the federal agency responsible for providing healthcare to Native Americans — would be sending additional CARES Act funds to Fort Belknap's Tribal Health Department. IHS set aside \$450 million for distribution to tribal health, urban Indian health and local IHS programs according to the Montana Budget & Policy Center. But Tribal Health Director Karen Yazzie said those funds never arrived.

"IHS didn't share any CARES Act money with us," Yazzie said. "No money that was allocated for behavioral health."

Tribal Health did receive over \$97,000 in CARES Act funds from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to put toward youth suicide and trauma prevention, but that funding was just

enough for computer cameras, staff laptops and increased administrative support.

CARES Act funding, in effect, did little to support youth mental health programs on the Fort Belknap reservation. Surprisingly, suicide completions trended downward once the pandemic hit.

Some tribal members link the decline in youth suicides to families being at home to-

gether during quarantine.

"My best guess is that people were actually home with their children," said Connie Filesteel, former special projects researcher for the council, who also organized community meetings following the 2019 state of emergency.

But for others, this downward trend has not been felt at all.

"It's a crisis," said Velvet Werk, nurse and emergency room supervisor for the IHS clinic in Hays, near the southern end of the reservation.

"We need to get more youth-based programs here, something that's going to engage them," Werk said. Without that support, she added, stress will continue to build up and become overwhelming, especially among young people.

Youth suicide numbers have decreased, but not disappeared. While CARES Act funds had minimal impact on youth mental health programs, community members on the Fort Belknap reservation are using tribal culture to build mental resilience. As the wounds of generational trauma continue to heal, tribal members believe that tapping into traditional practices connects young

people with their community and helps them access an inner strength that can carry them through moments of crisis.

For those left behind in the wake of a youth suicide epidemic, culture has become a form of prevention.

In March 2021, mental health providers from Tribal Health and IHS led two talking circles at Hays Lodgepole High School to help students process the news of a recent youth suicide. Principal Reyna Perez monitored students all day before heading home.

After attending the second talking circle, Perez felt drained. She curled up under a blanket in the living room and turned on the TV. Nearby, her 7 year-old son practiced his somersaults.

Perez's oldest daughter, Miquela Perez, sat on the couch across from her, at work on her iPad. Using a white Apple Pencil, Miquela traced digital images of old photographs to create illustrations of tribal members wearing traditional clothing. These drawings would soon fill the pages of a new tribal language curriculum, put together by Miquela's employer, the Language Nest.

"I'm so proud of her," Perez said, smiling, as she looked toward her daughter.

Miquela Perez grabbed her shoes and took her younger brother for a late afternoon walk. Once outside, they untethered their dog, Harley, and made their way to a path that ran along the highway.

"For a while there, it was hard to stay positive," she said. "I was severely depressed for a long time."

By early July 2019, two of Perez's close friends — Thane Helgeson, 19, and Erin Healy, 18, — died by suicide just over two weeks apart. The following February, she lost another friend to suicide — Jeffry "Weffy" Stiffarm, 19. Perez said that she began drinking in June, following Helgeson's death, and didn't stop for seven months.

"It was just really not a good life. We all went into very deep depressions," she said.

During that period, Perez found herself drifting away from her spirituality and traditional practices that had always been a part of her life.

"After they died, I became pretty hard,"



Renita Longknife, an elder and traditional healer, sits beside her sweat lodge near Fort Belknap Agency. Longknife helps young people connect to their cultural identity by leading sweats, talking circles and fasting trips.



Dominic Messerly walks into the Tribal Council Building at Fort Belknap Agency. Messerly has been a member of the tribal council since 2015.

Perez said. “I lost touch with God and was giving up on stuff like that.”

Then slowly, she began to revisit different cultural activities and felt her mindset start to shift.

“Because I got back into going to sweat, and speaking, and praying — it made me feel good. It made me feel better,” she said. “You have to choose a better life for yourself. You have to have enough will to get up ‘cause nobody’s going to do that for you. Nobody’s going to pull you out of bed.”

Now, she feels anchored by the sense of purpose she gains from translating and teaching Nakoda language classes.

“My language is what saved me, honestly,” she said.

Perez readily admits how lucky she is to have opportunities that so many young people on the reservation do not. She has a job; she has a community. But despite all the challenges young people face, Perez still believes that the reservation matters.

“There’s a lot of people who talk about how ugly [our rez] is, or how sad it is, or how pitiful we are, but this is our only home. This is where we’re from and running away from it isn’t going to fix anything,” she said.

Back at the house, Perez thought about her own future before heading inside.

“I want to travel so I can see the world ‘cause I know that there’s so much more to the world than here, but I don’t think I ever

want to leave my rez. I think we’re worth it,” Perez said.

Renita Longknife sat on a bench just inside the door of her sweat lodge near Fort Belknap Agency. A member of the Nakoda tribe, Longknife works as a traditional healer for IHS and provides mental health support throughout the reservation, including helping to lead talking circles at Hays Lodgepole High School.

“I feel that the kids are reaching out. They want to know who they are,” Longknife said.

Standing, she lit a small bundle of sage before sitting back down in the sunlight and lighting a cigarette. She wore a cap that read “Native Pride” and two long, gray braids draped over her shoulders.

Longknife is one of many tribal members who attended Indian boarding schools as children. The forced assimilation, abuse and cultural erasure of the boarding school era has left a powerful wake of generational trauma. As adults, many have re-embraced practices that were once forbidden. But more than that, elders want Native youth to feel the healing power of these traditions.

Following the 2019 suicide crisis, Longknife recalled community meetings where tribal members tried to figure out what was harming their young people.

“We in the community said, ‘Well, they

don’t have spirituality. They don’t have something they can hold on to,’” Longknife said.

She said this was due to the hardship of assimilating into white culture.

“I think it’s very important for us as elders — as parents and grandparents — to let them know that it’s okay now, it’s okay to be Indian,” she said. “We don’t have to be ashamed. We don’t have to be afraid.”

She recognized that many members of her parents’ generation were only trying to protect their children.

“They didn’t want us to be hurt. We were told, ‘You have to learn what you can about white society. It’s better if you go over there,’” she said.

But for Longknife, real healing and resilience stem from identity.

“Everyone needs a sense of belonging and I think that’s what the kids are searching for. If they can grasp onto that, then they’re going to be okay,” she said.

Connecting historical trauma to current mental health struggles is not unique to Fort Belknap — it is a long-recognized challenge among tribal communities. Shelby Rowe, a member of the Chickasaw Nation, has been studying this trend for years in her role as program manager for the Suicide Prevention Resource Center at the University of Oklahoma’s Health Science Center.

“When you, deliberately for hundreds of



Diana Bigby stands at the edge of Snake Butte — a sacred place to many Fort Belknap tribal members. Bigby teaches the girls in her female empowerment program to protect and appreciate the land and water. “Most people have a deep respect for this place. The ones who don’t, just weren’t taught,” Bigby said.

years, destroy culture, family and economic opportunities, you can’t blame it on the tribe for having unemployment and a broken family,” Rowe said. “When, for three generations, you stole their kids, beat them, raped them, and told them how worthless they were, what do you expect?”

Considering the profound trauma experienced, Rowe noted that tribal communities are uniquely resilient.

“[These] programs worked well at destroying [tribal] communities and cultures, but it’s not their culture that broke them,” she said.

The council began to reevaluate behavioral health services provided on the reservation in 2016. Dominic Messerly, a member of the Aaniiih tribe, was elected to the council in 2015 and tried to understand the best way to help tribal members’ mental health.

Messerly said Fort Belknap relies heavily on federal and state funding, particularly with the implementation of mental health programs. Because this funding is inconsistent, the tribes have struggled to provide continuous, coordinated care. Although the tribes have made progress in recent years — developing pilot programs aimed at integrating traditional practices into behavioral health treatment methods — funding remains an ongoing issue.

Tribal Health faces numerous roadblocks, including lack of access to IHS data and a multi-year process for mental health providers to receive credentials, Messerly said.

“There’s a lot of bureaucracy,” he said. “It’s pretty frustrating.”

In the past several years, two Tribal Health programs have worked to incorporate traditional culture into youth suicide prevention: Empowering Inner Strength and Native Connections.

Messerly said the vision behind Empowering Inner Strength was to remove the word “suicide” and recenter mental healthcare around a more positive idea of selfhood.

“We wanted to take the stigma away. The vision behind it was, through our own cultural lessons and philosophies, we would be able to help our community members struggling with mental health,” Messerly said. “Tapping into their inner power would be their strength to get them through.”

Though Empowering Inner Strength lost its grant funding in 2020, the tribe had ap-



Two dragonflies are tattooed on Perez’s forearm in memory of her two friends who died by suicide. “Ever since I got them tattooed on me, I only see dragonflies in twos,” Perez said.

plied for — and was awarded — a five-year SAMHSA grant in 2019, enabling Tribal Health to continue youth suicide prevention through a new program called Native Connections.

Due to the pandemic, Native Connections is all online, but has brought the community together through Zoom classes focused on traditional practices like beading or virtual talking circles. According to June Ellestad, project director for Tribal Health, while these programs will not solve mental health struggles immediately, she is hopeful that they will make a difference in the long term.

“The data tells me that culture is prevention,” Ellestad said. “And what I see is that connection matters.”

The council is in the process of negotiating an agreement with IHS that would enable Tribal Health to take complete ownership of all behavioral health services.

“A lot of our people aren’t willing to go get help [at IHS] because they can’t relate to the providers,” Messerly said. “They can’t

relate to the services that are being provided.”

He hopes that this agreement will usher in a new era where community members can access better, more holistic mental health care grounded in traditional practices.

Other programs have evolved from a grassroots level.

Diana Bigby, who works for Tribal Health as a tobacco prevention officer, started a girls empowerment program in 2018 called the Girls Society in response to youth suicide. Together with a friend, Bigby developed the program to create a safe space where girls could learn about their Indigenous roots.

In addition to teaching them how to make ribbon skirts or prepare for powwows, Bigby also shares coping skills like deep breathing exercises to help the girls move through overwhelming emotions.

“There’s no one there to teach you coping mechanisms. That’s where the alcoholism comes in, that’s where the meth comes in,” Bigby said. “If we are taught to cope in a different way, I don’t think a lot of those

things would be happening.” Bigby, a mother of five, reminds her kids that they are resilient.

“Our people have been through so much and we’re still here for a reason,” Bigby said.

As Perez floated in the warm waters of the Fresno Reservoir an hour outside of the reservation, she was grateful to be feeling more like herself.

Since the loss of her friends, Perez’s mental health had improved. She no longer suffered from the severe depression she felt in the months immediately following her friends’ passing.

She heard a low hum and felt something land lightly on her skin. Lifting her head, she saw a dragonfly perched on top of her hand.

Perez realized that it was exactly one year to the day from the last time she saw one of her lost friends alive.

She wondered if the dragonfly on her hand could have been him. ♦



A HOME THAT ISN'T

COVID-19 exposes housing crisis on Flathead

Story by Hanna Campbell
Photos by Kaitlyn Torgerson

Aide Talamantes parked her 2010 Dodge Grand Caravan minivan in front of her daughter's apartment complex in Ronan, Montana. The 60-year-old gas station clerk unzipped her pink and white windbreaker, revealing the "Conoco" logo on her work shirt. Tala-

mantes sighed, weary after her shift. She exited the still warm van, readying herself to enter a home that was not her own. But it was a safer one. Fewer people means less crowding, meaning less chance of contracting COVID-19.

Sam Barnaby, Talamantes' husband,

Aide Talamantes stands in her living room with her grandson Legend. Talamantes lives with her daughter and grandchildren in a four-bedroom, two-bathroom affordable housing unit in Ronan, Montana.

caught it Jan. 3. He thinks it came from a customer at his workplace, Walmart. Talamantes caught it three days later. Within the week, the entire household was sick: their grandson, nephew, and Barnaby's brother.

A month later, after everyone recovered, Talamantes moved out.

Talamantes left with her grandson and moved in with her daughter, Christina Talamantes, and her daughter's 4-year-old. Barnaby and their nephew remained behind 23 miles away in Dixon, Montana.

Christina Talamantes' apartment is a

small four-bedroom. Noise travels easily between apartments and is heavily surrounded by drug users. During Talamantes' three months living there, three drug busts have occurred in the six-unit complex. Christina Talamantes and her mother do not see eye to eye, making the situation more complicated.

"Sometimes it's not always doable, but you just have to sometimes deal with the circumstances you are living in and try to make things work," Aide Talamantes said.

Barnaby and Talamantes have applied for housing assistance through the tribe,

unsuccessfully, time and time again.

The pandemic brought to light the severity of the housing situation on the Flathead Indian Reservation, particularly in regards to multigenerational living. High home prices and bureaucracy in home ownership on tribal lands over the decades have made multigenerational homes commonplace. This has created a unique homelessness and unstable housing situation on reservations that existed before the pandemic.

"Homelessness here is different from Missoula," said Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Housing Authority Executive Director Jody Perez. "It can be seen in tents, it's visible [in Missoula]. Ours is more silent, like couch surfing. It's harder to see."

There are several ways to define homelessness. According to the Oxford Encyclopedia of Social Work, homelessness is defined as a person who lacks a fixed house and regular residence, or someone having to rely on temporary living arrangements. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion says unstable housing encompasses overcrowding and trouble paying rent.

In Indian Country, households are more likely to welcome family members to live long term rather than see them unsheltered. This often leads to single households with several generations under one roof, even if it results in tight living spaces. People who fit the definition of homelessness likely do not consider themselves as such since they have a roof over their heads.

The pandemic has exacerbated the situation in multigenerational housing due to the lack of social distancing and sanitation. According to a paper published by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in 2020, 10% of the national homeless population will be hospitalized for COVID-19 and are up to four times more likely to require critical care.

"Homeless people are twice as likely to get hospitalized for COVID-19. They cannot even wash their hands," Perez said.

To combat this issue, the CSKT allocated \$6.2 million out of the \$44.3 million received by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to address the housing situation on the Flathead reservation.

The tribes used the \$6.2 million to pur-



chase a handful of permanent housing projects, including seven manufactured homes for families needing housing, and 14 dwellings in a renovated hotel. The tribes also committed to upgrading infrastructure projects, including a section of their sewage and water system, to support future housing projects.

In total, the tribes intend to provide 21 housing units immediately.

Home ownership has long been sold as the American Dream: the white picket fence, the beautifully groomed lawn, the exquisite home.

Even before the pandemic, owning a home on Indian reservations has been challenging. Housing on the reservations has been heavily overseen by the federal government for decades, beginning with the 1937 Housing Act.

Reservation land itself is also generally held "in trust" by the federal government, and is managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This makes owning land challenging. In several cases, people can own the house on the land but not the land itself, making investing in a home difficult.

The CSKT Housing Authority regularly maintains 496 housing units throughout the reservation, not including the seven manufactured homes, and provides rental



ABOVE: The Morning Star Permanent Support of Housing held an open house on March 31, 2021. Most of the attendees were from different departments within the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribal government.

BELOW: Executive Director of the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority Jody Perez stands in front of one of her childhood homes. Perez grew up in tribal housing and understands the housing challenges on the reservation.



Adeleene Rockwell, a reentry attorney with the Tribal Defenders Office, prepares a bed in one of the units at the Morning Star housing facility on March 9, 2021. Rockwell and other members of the Tribal Defenders Office spent several hours furnishing the various rooms on site.

assistance. Established in 1963, it works with a \$10 million annual budget, according to a 2016 CSKT Housing Authority case study.

The 496 units are generally used for transitional and temporary housing while people get back on their feet. In order to live in most Housing Authority structures, the tenant is responsible for paying 30% of their income toward rent. The Housing Authority will cover the rest with additional funds from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, according to Perez.

“Home ownership — affordable home ownership — is the key. We have very low ceiling rents for our 500 units. It’s really hard for someone who has been paying very low amounts to jump into a mortgage payment,” Perez said. “We want it to be affordable but we want to get them ready to be self-sufficient.”

Perez takes her role seriously. She lived in low rent housing with her father, brother and sister from the age of 12 to 16.

When her parents got a divorce, her father lived in a camper until he was accepted into the program.

“I feel a total pull on my heart strings because if my dad wouldn’t have had that opportunity to have that low rent unit, I could have never lived with him and it would have been a whole different life for me,” Perez said. “This is my way of giving back. I am a product of housing.”

Her father eventually graduated from the program and built his own three-story, eight-bedroom home.

However, despite the Housing Authority’s best efforts, some families, like Talamantes’, are still being overlooked.

“If [the housing authority] can’t see a family that is really hurting and that is really going through a lot of devastation about the way we have to live right now, and that we had to separate our family ... It’s not easy,” Talamantes said. “It doesn’t seem like our situation really matters.”

The tribe used CARES Act money to build seven modular homes. They are spread across Pablo and Kicking Horse, Montana, with five at the former and two at the latter.

Nolan Mitchel, a purchasing agent for the CSKT Housing Authority, oversaw the acquisition of the seven housing units and has helped with the project since it began in October of 2020.

“I was impressed when I came in here. I was like ‘holy cow!’,” Mitchel laughed.

He is anxious for people to move in.

Due to extensive and slow background checks, the homes have been waiting for their future tenants since Dec. 31, 2020. As of late March, the selected tenants were notified and started the moving process in April of 2021, four months after the homes were completed.



Susette Billedeaux, the Tribal Defenders Office holistic programming director, waits to welcome visitors to the open house of the Morning Star housing facility.

But Mitchel has a vision for these homes.

“I’m hoping that [the tenants] all have kids and develop a community around here,” he said. “Right now, it’s not a great neighborhood.”

Candidates for the project have to meet the criteria found in a point system created by the Housing Authority. The most points, 25, go to people who are homeless or at risk of being so, like Talamantes and Barnaby. People experiencing overcrowding receive 20, and between five and 15 points go to people who are living below the poverty line.

An additional five points are given to households with veterans, healthcare workers who cannot find housing, people already in low rent housing through the Housing Authority and people displaced from previously rented homes due to its owner selling the house.

The scale of rent changes depending on the size of the home — \$700 for a three bedroom, \$800 for a four bedroom. Unlike the Morning Star Permanent Housing and most other Housing Authority homes, the rent for the modular homes cannot account for more than 30% of the tenant’s income, and is meant to transition families to purchase a home of their own.

The modular homes represent the new emphasis on supportive permanent housing. The department previously relied heavily on the use of temporary housing,

but they found this method has failed to properly address the root causes of homelessness. According to a report published by HUD in 2016, this includes economic disparity, lack of mental health and addiction treatment services, racial inequality, lack of affordable housing and lack of healthcare.

“When you kick somebody out who is already unstable, it makes them more unstable. It doesn’t fix the problem. It just makes it worse,” Perez said. “Now, instead of compliance it’s about personal development.”

This is currently a solution for only seven families. Despite Barnaby being an enrolled member in the tribe, he and his family have been overlooked for housing time and again.

They are growing frustrated.

“You have all this money that is out there that is supposed to be helping us, not just Native but also anybody who is suffering from this pandemic who are living on the reservation,” Barnaby said. “It’s not just for this clique over here and, oh, we will just forget about these hillbillies down the creek. No, it’s about helping everyone.”

According to a study by the National Healthcare for Homeless Council, nearly 33% of tribal homes across the nation are overcrowded — six times the national average. The average time for a person to be on the housing waiting list is 41 months.



Aide Talamantes and her partner, Sam Barnaby, speak about their challenges with housing both on and off the Flathead reservation. The two lived with family members after struggling to find reliable and affordable housing on the reservation.

Now during COVID-19, this waiting time could be turned from a frustrating wait to a deadly delay. Currently, there are 49 candidates on the housing list for the modular homes, and the Talamantes family are among them.

“We applied for those CARES Act [modular homes], but prior to that we applied to housing.... and we are still on the waiting list,” Barnaby said.

The Housing Authority set aside \$3 million to upgrade a failing water and sewage system at Kicking Horse, Montana. The project initially started to provide sewage and running water to establishments that would be converted to homes for people experiencing unstable housing.

But the acquisitions fell through due to time constraints. Instead, the Housing Authority decided to use assets on land where the system was redone. They moved several departments to that area to promote social distancing, and have plans

to build 13 homes in the area that would rely on the rebuilt system.

“During shut down tribal offices moved out there,” Perez said. “Everyone had to keep working, it just spread it out to some extent.”

The Morning Star Permanent Housing Units was bustling with workers from the Tribal Defenders Office, which runs the Morning Star Project. The department’s director, Ann Miller, shoveled snow from the sidewalks and the courtyard of the renovated space to make a safe pathway while the final details of the project were handled.

The space is meant to be a resource for people in the reentry program who have formerly been in the criminal justice system. Fourteen units will become homes for future candidates, providing a permanent space for them.

“Everyone has the same questions: ‘Is it transitional housing? Is it sober living?’

No, it’s not. People can stay as long as they want,” Miller said. “What we are hoping is to build a community that supports each other in whatever they need.”

Susette Billedeaux, the Director of the Flathead Reservation Reentry Program, said people experiencing homelessness and unstable housing are surrounded by unsteady situations, such as minimal access to affordable health care, food insecurity, poverty and lack of housing.

“We are trying to stabilize them so they can even receive services,” Billedeaux said. “It is a vicious cycle that we are trying to stop.”

The Tribal Defenders Office used a vulnerability index based on need, similar to the one used for the modular homes, to determine whether a person was qualified to live in the units. After selecting applicants, the Tribal Defender’s Office sent their choices to the Housing Authority to determine whether they qualified financially.

Heather Mitchell lives in a four bed-

room house off a long stretch of dirt road on the Flathead Reservation. The Mission Mountains loom over the house situated on the valley floor. This house — and the camper — acts as the home for Heather, her son, her sister, three nephews, brother and her mother.

Her sister has asthma. Her brother has diabetes. Her mother has a chronic lung disease. Although COVID-19 never penetrated their household, it has been a near crippling thought to its members.

“We really tried to isolate, but we were expecting to have to deal with the consequences of [COVID] anyways. It was scary. I was so scared of bringing it to the household,” Mitchell said.

The absence of housing encourages multigenerational living, which, according to the Pew Research Center, can be defined as three or more generations living in a household. This is seen heavily in the reservation due to economic and cultural reasons.

The housing on the reservation has also been steadily decreasing in availability to locals, according to Perez. COVID-19, especially, has brought people from out of state to buy homes on the reservation, particularly from California, Texas and Oregon. Luedtke Homes Real Estate Agent Lacy Cates said she has three available listings compared to her usual amount of 20.

“With the amount of inventory, there is just nothing to sell people. We just don’t have anything for sale,” Cates said.

Coming home from another shift, Talamantes saw a realtor showing three available units above her daughter’s. People meandered through the rooms. Despite her best efforts, Talamantes could not help but feel angry and saddened.

“It just made me feel like we are going through all this and my husband is a tribal member yet somebody else is getting those, and here we are we are still waiting,” Talamantes said.

Her kind features fell into a sad frown and her compassionate disposition became a little more burdened as she walked slowly to her daughter’s apartment, turned the knob and entered the home that she did not own. ♦



Hill 57 on the northwest edge of Great Falls, Montana, was once home to a large community of landless Little Shell tribal members. Today, the Little Shell Cultural Center sits below the hill.

INDEPENDENCE THROUGH ACCESS

Little Shell tribe forges path to health care

Story by Lena Beck
Photos by Megan Johnson

One spring day when Julia Gladeau was a child, her aunt asked her to keep an eye on her younger siblings. Her aunt and Gladeau’s pregnant mother walked across Hill 57 and out of sight.

“We’re going to go find the Easter Bunny for you up there at that other shack,” her aunt had said. “We’ll be back in a little bit.” When they returned down the hill, her mother had a baby girl in her arms. “Look what the Easter Bunny brought you,” she said. “It’s a baby, and her name is Shirley.”

Gladeau’s daughter, Julie Mitchell, heard that story many times growing up. “They had her right on Hill 57,” Mitchell said. “My grandma’s sister went up there and helped her have her in that other shack on dirt floors.”

Hill 57 sits on the edge of Great Falls and was home to a settlement of the Little Shell tribe. Even in the late 1930s when Mitchell’s aunt was born, there were plenty of doctors and hospitals in the growing industrial town. The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians has a tumultuous history with the state of Montana. Because of that, the tribe’s access to institutionalized health care has always been unreliable. In December of 2019, the Little Shell were finally recognized by the federal government as a sovereign nation.

Not even three months later, the world was hit with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of their newly recognized status, the Little Shell received \$25 million in CARES Act funding, as part of a federal pandemic relief program. The Little Shell are using that money to build a health center of their own, taking ownership of their access to health care at long last.

Investing in a health center of their own was one of the first big purchases for the tribe. The Little Shell bought a former veterinary clinic with just over \$1 million of CARES Act funds and are spending another million on a complete interior renovation. The Little Shell Tribal Health Clinic is scheduled to open in some capacity later this year.

University of Montana professor Dave Beck studies tribal sovereignty and said Little Shell’s move to build a health clinic makes sense. But moving forward, Beck said one of the keys to success is economic development. “What you want to be able to do is build a diverse economic base, so you’re not relying on any one source of income,” Beck said. “Especially so you’re not simply relying on income from the federal government, because that might never be enough to create a healthy infrastructure for your community.”

This is because the CARES Act money that the Little Shell used to buy their clinic won’t last forever. Ultimately, the tribe will need alternate sources of funding. The Little Shell tribe is currently collaborating with the Indian Health Service to develop a plan for running the clinic, though no details have been finalized. Working with the notoriously bureaucratic federal department could prove difficult.

IHS is the division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that facilitates Native American health care. They are responsible for more than 230 hospitals and clinics throughout the country. This includes six IHS-run units in the service area spanning Montana and Wyoming. IHS provides the medical services treaty-promised to tribes by the federal government. Therefore, it only serves members of federally recognized tribes, which means that the Little Shell didn’t qualify for services until December of 2019. But funding for IHS is a continual problem.



Little Shell member Julie Mitchell has navigated the health care system her whole life and is excited for the new Little Shell clinic to open in Great Falls. “Getting a clinic is going to be an eye opening experience that we do belong here,” Mitchell said.

“The Indian Health Service budget does not account nor has it historically ever accounted for health care inflation”
-Mary-Lynne Billy

The IHS budget for the 2021 fiscal year is \$6.2 billion, in comparison to 2020 when it was \$6 billion. Based on IHS data from 2015-2020, IHS spent \$4,078 per person for medical care in a year, barely half of the national average. According to Mary-Lynne Billy of the Indian Family Health Clinic in Great Falls, the federal government hasn’t proportionately increased the IHS budget enough to account for population increases and health care inflation. “The Indian Health Service budget does not account nor has it historically ever accounted for health care inflation,” Billy said. “It doesn’t progressively account for the cost of the changing conditions of health care and the increase in costs, it just stays the same. So consequently, you see the complete continuation of rationing of health care.” Billy said that number should have grown to as much as \$50 billion in order to accommodate inflation and the growing population served by IHS. Data from the National Congress of American Indians confirms

funds to hire Molly Wendland as health director for the clinic. She is currently acting as the go-between for the Little Shell and IHS. Wendland, with a background in medical administration, says this is new territory for everybody. This is the first time this regional service area of IHS has seen a newly federally recognized tribe open a clinic. Wendland says they are learning from each other as they go. “We are building the plane as we fly it,” Wendland said.

Gray sees this clinic as a critical next step in what has been a long journey toward access to institutionalized health care. Because the Little Shell did not have access to IHS prior to their federal recognition, they’ve had to depend on other sources of health care. Many Little Shell members have been instrumental in creating those spaces for others in the tribe. Daniel Pocha is a Little Shell elder who lives in Helena. He grew up there, and as an adult took over the family business, Pocha Brothers Upholstery. He spends many of his days cutting and stitching fabric in his workshop, which is adjoined to his house. Pocha speaks softly, but has a lively sense of humor and makes jokes wherever possible, even while talking about his line of work. “It was kind of a toss-up between an upholsterer, a carpenter and a mechanic,” Pocha said. “Upholsterers grew old with all their fingers. I thought that was better.” But in addition to upholstery, Pocha also sat on the board of the Helena Indian Alliance for years. During that time, he sought to help urban Native Americans like the Little Shell gain access to health care. In 1981 the Helena Indian Alliance opened the Leo Pocha Memorial Clinic in Helena, named after his father. Today, 78% of all Native Americans live in urban spaces away from reservations and their IHS centers. Urban Indian clinics like the Memorial Clinic serve members of any tribe, federally recognized or not. “Our belief was that if we could not provide services, we would help you acquire that service,” Pocha said. “Because health is that important.” Though the advent of Urban Indian clinics helped, many Little Shell members still found themselves being forced to travel to get specialist care. Julie Mitchell remembers that 20 years ago, she had to drive her four-



Dan Pocha stands outside of his upholstery shop in Helena, Montana. Pocha helped open the Leo Pocha Memorial Clinic in 1981 in memory of his father.

year-old daughter to Browning in order to get her tonsils removed. Mitchell didn't have insurance at the time, and traveling to the Blackfeet reservation was the only way to get the procedure without being handed the entire bill.

The drive to Browning from Great Falls is nearly two hours, made longer by the fact that Mitchell had to keep stopping the car to tend to her sick child.

"It was super hard," Mitchell said. "She was sick in the back and I had to keep pulling over, and give her water and lay her back down."

At the clinic in Browning, Mitchell remembers feeling neglected, like they'd been put in a room and forgotten about. Her daughter got the procedure, but they had to spend the night in the hospital. If they'd been in Great Falls, they would have just gone home. But it was too far to travel in case there were complications.

And there were complications. Without warning, Mitchell's daughter began to vomit blood uncontrollably.

"They just kind of ignored her and put her in a room and all the blood swarmed to her stomach," Mitchell said. "And then she threw it up all over. I was freaking out."

Fortunately, her daughter made a full recovery. But the memory still makes Mitchell shiver with fear.

Mitchell curled up next to her daughter in her hospital bed and tried to sleep. But she wouldn't rest much. Why can't we get care

at home? Mitchell wondered. Where is our space in the healthcare system?

It's a sunny day in March, but the wind chill keeps it from feeling very warm. Little Shell elder Louella Fredricksen and her best friend Darrel Rummel sit at a plastic-top table at Lippi's, their favorite spot to catch a bite.

Lippi's Kitchen is an eclectic diner just off Central Avenue in Great Falls. Its walls are decorated with artwork and gadgets collected over the years, and in the corner is a spinning pie display. Lippi's pies are legendary.

The pandemic has been lonely for Fredricksen and Rummel, who are both elders. In normal times, they do everything together. Others have described them as "joined at the hip." They go to lunch at Lippi's, to community dances and they've even been known to travel together in Fredricksen's old camper van. Usually, they drive to other parts of the state to go to Little Shell gatherings. Once, they flew down to San Antonio for a rodeo.

But at the onset of the pandemic, all of those fun outings came to a grinding halt. Rummel and Fredricksen still spoke on the phone just about every day, but it wasn't the same. Since they've been vaccinated, they can take up some of their old hobbies again, starting with Lippi's. Fredricksen sips a black tea, while Rummel sprinkles salt on her hashbrowns.



Pocha holds a braid of sweetgrass, used for smudging.

Rummel and Fredricksen got their vaccines at the Cascade County Fairgrounds. The day they went in to get their shots turned into the biggest social outing they'd had in months.

"It was just so nice to get out and see people and talk to people in person," Fredricksen said.

When they got back into the car, Fredricksen turned to Rummel. "Wasn't this fun?" she said.

Little Shell Tribal Health Director Molly Wendland was there at the fairgrounds when they got their vaccines. With the new Little Shell clinic not open at the time, she coordinated with the pre-established infrastructure of the Cascade City-County Health Department to ensure that members of the Little Shell could get vaccinated.

"The two times I went, I didn't even know they gave me a shot," Rummel said. "They did such a good job. And it didn't get sore afterwards."

Wendland desperately wanted to be involved with building the Little Shell's first in-house medical infrastructure. Last October she got her wish. She was outside in her yard, trying to get a coat of paint on her house before winter's arrival, when her phone rang. On the other end of the line was Chairman Gerald Gray, asking her if she would be the tribe's first-ever health director.

"I was just so excited," Wendland said. "I had to take a break and celebrate for a

minute."

Despite the clinic not being open yet, Wendland is already hard at work. She spends every day doing an amalgamation of different tasks, everything from directing construction to coordinating COVID-19 vaccinations. She also spends a lot of time coordinating care for members in other cities and states. She wants to be able to provide answers to those who cannot visit the clinic in person.

Currently, the clinic is gutted, but not empty. Construction workers are methodically working away inside, installing lighting and infrastructure that will give way to patient rooms and a waiting area.

Within those spaces, Wendland plans to orchestrate a medical venue that addresses holistic needs. Not just basic medical services, but dental, vision and specialist care. This includes additional programming like cultural practices, a community garden, food baskets and campaigns against non-traditional tobacco use. Wendland has also helped establish a transit service that will take elders to wherever they need to go, around Great Falls or out of town.

Rummel and Fredricksen said specialist care will be especially useful for tribal elders. Fredricksen had to drive the five-and-a-half hours to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho for dental treatment a few years ago just to get a more affordable rate than she could find in Great Falls.

"I think with our elders, there's so many



ABOVE: Fredricksen and her dog Freddy sit in her home in Great Falls. The pandemic has been lonely for the widowed elder of the Little Shell tribe, but Fredricksen recently received her vaccine, which was coordinated by the tribe's new health director.

RIGHT: Fredricksen holds a photograph of herself and her close friend Darrel Rummel from a past trip to San Antonio, Texas. The two friends recently got their COVID-19 vaccines together through the Little Shell tribe and the Cascade City-County Health Department.

that have hearing problems, eye problems, [and] dentures," Fredricksen said. "So this clinic will really be a big help for us."

Fredricksen also said she wants to use the new transit service to get up to Havre to visit her family so she doesn't have to drive that far by herself. But additionally, Rummel and Fredricksen are excited about how mental

health, tobacco, and natural medicine initiatives can help the tribe's younger generations.

Both women agree, they are excited and anxious for the clinic to open.

When the waitress came to clear the dishes, Rummel grabbed her remaining piece of bacon before letting her plate be taken.





Construction workers renovate a former veterinary clinic in Great Falls that will become the home of the new Little Shell clinic. The new clinic, purchased with CARES Act funding, is set to open at the end of summer 2021.

“We’re really looking forward to getting this up and running,” she said.

Because of the intricate processes involved in starting a health center, some services may be years from coming to fruition.

Chairman Gray isn’t discouraged by this, but rather considers it an opportunity to lay the foundation for a successful health center. For now, he is trying to manage the expectations of Little Shell members.

“A lot of members thought that once we got federally recognized that everything will be instant,” Gray said. “It doesn’t work like that.”

Though it may be slow-going, Gray feels

confident in his choice to invest in a clinic devoted to Little Shell health. Gray said it will be a place where Little Shell members will never be turned away. For many years, Little Shell members like Julie Mitchell have even been rejected from IHS clinics on other tribes’ reservations.

Mitchell’s husband grew up on the Rocky Boy’s reservation. Once while visiting, Mitchell cut her leg. She couldn’t stop the bleeding on her own, so her mother-in-law took her to the IHS clinic a mile away from her house so she could get stitches. But Little Shell was still an unrecognized tribe at the time, and so the clinic turned her away.

“They refused me medical care there at that time, because they said I was from a

non-federally recognized tribe,” Mitchell said. “You’re not considered an Indian.”

Mitchell applied pressure to her leg while her mother-in-law drove her 30 miles down the road to the next clinic, where Mitchell paid out of pocket. Even at a clinic run by another tribe, the message felt clear: You don’t belong here.

But that is all about to change. With a new clinic soon to open, and a sovereign government being built, the future looks strong. The next generation of Little Shell members is coming into adulthood as a new chapter for the tribe begins.

Mitchell’s 19-year-old twin daughters, Rylee and Madison, are students at Great Falls College. Rylee shows promise as a

writer, already having written for the Great Falls Tribune. Madison is leaning towards something more medical, maybe nursing.

She can envision a career in nursing in Great Falls, maybe even at the Little Shell’s new tribal health center. She’s young now, and so is the clinic, but they’re both fulfilling something that has long been in the making. She would be helping provide the kind of health care that her grandmother’s generation was denied.

To Julie Mitchell, it’s an affirmation of something she has always known.

“We belong here,” Mitchell said. ♦

2021 INDIGENOUS CELEBRATION



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