

One Tribal Nation Winning Against COVID

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MASHPEE, Massachusetts. —As they do today, ancestors of the Wampanoag Nation walked the land of present-day Massachusetts and Eastern Rhode Island dating back 12,000 years. Tribal members even met traders from Europe and the Mayflower when the pilgrims first came ashore. These stories still resonate in many circles: a pandemic swept through the Tribe, and much like the pandemic of today, the virus was novel and deadly.

In 1616, traders from Europe brought disease to Wampanoag territory. The geographical area affected included all 69 tribes of the Wampanoag Nation from present day Provincetown, Mass., to Narragansett Bay—the boundary of the Wampanoag and Narragansett Nations. Fully two thirds of the entire Wampanoag Nation (estimated at 45,000) died. This also represented a loss of many speakers of the language. Hardest hit were Elders and small children, critical age groups for any language. European disease would also place into jeopardy each tribe's ability to sustain a population for defense of its territory and culture.

In 1620, the Mayflower arrived in current day Provincetown, Mass., and then moved across Cape Cod Bay to Pahtuksut (current day Plymouth, Mass.) The Wampanoag didn't approach the Europeans for another three months for fear of more disease being brought ashore.

Following this first three-month period of mitigation efforts, the Mashpee Wampanoag helped the pilgrims regain their health. And in a twist of fate, today, both the Mashpee Wampanoag Nation and the federal government are working together to support tribal members struggling with COVID-19.

The care and protection of the Wampanoag people is as strong as any other nation in the country with more than 2,600 tribal members living in outlying communities near the tribal reservation. Before 'COVID-19' became entrenched in our language, tribal leaders were mapping out a plan. The Mashpee Wampanoag was the first Native American tribe in the region and second in the country to



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establish a COVID strategy. Before President Trump ever declared the pandemic a national emergency, Mashpee Wampanoag Emergency Management Director, Nelson Andrews, Jr., approached the tribal council and asked the Chairman to declare a state of emergency and shut everything down. To protect his fellow tribal members, Andrews wanted to temporarily close the community and government center to all non-essential employees. He then initiated a request to FEMA for direct Federal Assistance.

Within hours of the Tribe taking action, Capt. Russ Webster, FEMA's Regional Administrator who also serves as the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for the COVID-19 response, called Andrews. "Throughout history, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe has been self-sufficient and FEMA respects them as a sovereign nation," said Webster. "If they have a mission we can support, we're going to be there," he added.

Captain Webster immediately sent FCO Adam Burpee to serve as FEMA's liaison to the Tribal Nation. Burpee's role, as Webster described it, is connecting people with resources. "That's the art and science of emergency management," he explained.

For the next few months, Andrews and Burpee worked around-the-clock. FEMA awarded the Mashpee Wampanoag more than \$130,000 in Public Assistance grants, which was used to purchase security glass, disinfect the government building, and to provide shelter for the Tribe's homeless. Meanwhile, Burpee reached out to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for its tribal support units. In what's known as a "government-to-government relationship," the CDC sent epidemiologists, a contact tracing team, an infection prevention and control team, and an incident command team to support the Tribe for 60 days. Even with this added support, just after the Fourth of July, the number of COVID cases among tribal members being tested on the reservation jumped by 40 percent. All official Independence Day celebrations and the tribe's annual Pow-Wow were canceled, though some gatherings were held anyway. The fear for the tribe's Elders became even more elevated. How could they keep the most revered segment of their population safe, when the Elders were also the least likely to recover if they got the virus?

Andrews felt the first step was to quarantine those infected. "One of the first things I did was to rent a hotel," he said. "I paid \$30,000 (of emergency management



funds) up front and asked the manager, ‘Can we use this hotel to quarantine?’ And we put that in place.”

The tribe’s \$30,000 was well spent. Infected members readily agreed to protect the rest of the population and stayed in quarantine up to a month. The CDC then worked to get out effective messaging about safety and wearing a mask.

That led many tribal members to seek Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from the reservation. The Mashpee Wampanoag have an Indian Health Service (IHS) clinic; not all Tribal Nations have one. Even with the clinic, the Tribe had a limited supply of gloves and some coveted N-95 respirator masks. Andrews quickly gained more PPE through federal and non-profit resources, including FEMA.

For example, the FEMA Region 1 warehouse shipped the Tribe roughly 13,000 cloth face coverings, 6,000 procedural masks, 26,000 Nitrile gloves, 5,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, 8,330 N95 respirator masks and 5,370 KN95 respirator masks. The Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, FEMA, and the tribal community all collaborated to distribute these and other much needed supplies.

Although the Tribe’s campaign efforts undoubtedly assisted in curbing an outbreak of the virus, it’s inconclusive to know if any deaths were directly related to the pandemic. “Unless Tribal members are tested at an IHS clinic, there is no way of accurately tracking positivity rates among the tribal community” said Regina Marotto-Benjamin, FEMA Region 1, Tribal Liaison Officer.

Non-IHS facilities do not ask for Tribal membership on registration forms, and even if they do, there is no communication back to the specific Tribe.

“So, any number of Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal members could have been tested and/or treated in any non-IHS facility across the country and the Tribe would not know about it, unless the person self-reports, which is not usually required and difficult to enforce.”

With a second wave approaching this winter, the Tribe plans to be in step with the “new normal.” A phased approach to the Tribe’s re-entry planning is outlined in a document they developed entitled ‘Resilient Comeback.’ It details what this school year will look like, as well as how Tribal Court will function. Plans are



underway for the distribution of COVID vaccinations and potential flu season occurring simultaneously.

As this pandemic sweeps the globe, Nelson is confident his tribe remains prepared to stay safe and healthy this winter. With FEMA's technical support and funding, the agency and the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe will continue their mission together by providing meals and PPE, as well as non-congregate sheltering for its sick and homeless tribal members.

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