

Asthma management and environmental concerns in northwest New Mexico: The role of a school-based health center in promoting well-being

The Cuba School-Based Health Center, run by Presbyterian Medical Services, serves students in elementary, middle, and high school, as well as Head Start. In this predominantly low-income community, 65% of the student population is Native American. A large majority of students live on the Navajo reservation, with transportation to and from school taking up to four hours round trip each day. Environmental factors, such as fracking and substandard housing conditions, have negative health impacts and the clinic has seen a recent increase in asthma diagnoses among children. While the school-based health center staff knew they couldn't address all the environmental factors contributing to the problem of asthma, they knew they could ensure that students with asthma received the care and support they need while at school.



They began with an effort to identify all of the students at school with asthma. Their outreach led to the identification of several students who had asthma but had not yet been identified as having asthma by the school or school-based health center. Combined with their existing patients, they had a total of 34 students with an asthma diagnosis. Six of those students were already consistently seeing their primary care physicians for asthma management.

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— Christine Montoya, SBHC Coordinator

The school-based health center staff consistently saw the other 28 students throughout the school year, supporting them with both clinical and environmental management of asthma. They gave the students appropriate asthma medications, along with spacers, and ensured that the students knew how to properly take their medications. They also gave the students Asthma Action Plans and shared them with family members and school staff, so that there was a team approach to asthma management.

The next step in their project directed their efforts at educating the students and school staff about environmental asthma triggers and included tips for reducing triggers in the Asthma Action Plans. The school-based health center staff wanted to ensure that school staff could support the students with asthma.



The high school principal assembled the school faculty, coaches, and staff for a presentation conducted by Dr. Frances Chavez, the school-based health center physician. The presentation included information on:

- The impact of asthma
- Asthma signs and symptoms
- Environmental triggers that exacerbate asthma
- Asthma Action Plans—what they are and how to use them
- How to assist a student who is having an asthma attack

The staff greatly appreciated the additional information about asthma and the environmental triggers that exacerbate symptoms. Christine Montoya, the SBHC Coordinator, explained, "I totally believe that the teachers and coaches have a better understanding of asthma and its triggers. Previously, I feel like they were, at times, thinking that the students were exaggerating how they were feeling. The coaches now know to ask a student for their Asthma Action Plan when issues arise." The SBHC could not have been as successful with their pilot program had it not been for a supportive school administration. They have a very proactive school staff and the principal and school nurses were key in the success of their project. Having buy-in from the school made the implementation of the project successful.

The students were more engaged in managing their asthma after their ongoing patient education—taking all their medications regularly and sticking with follow-up visits. Christine Montoya explained that in the past, students didn't know what resources were available to them. She shared, "Now that they know what to do, they're more proactive with their care."

School-based health center staff also attended meetings of the Navajo Nation Chapter Officials, who have been working diligently to address the broader environmental concerns of fracking and substandard housing conditions, including lack of running water and electricity in many dwellings. Students who reside in these areas now have a better understanding of what is going on with their bodies and how the environment can trigger their asthma. This has led to students seeking care more regularly when they need it. The SBHC has shared data with the Navajo Nation Chapters about the asthma burden that their students experience and with their shared interest in supporting the health and well-being of children, there may be opportunities for strong collaboration in the future, addressing the burden of asthma

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