

A Path Forward: Social Justice, A *Thread* that Weaves Us Together

by Lisa Cacari Stone, PhD, TREE Center Director

Civil Rights: A Thread Unwoven

Food insecurity, poverty, discrimination, racism, unemployment, geographic isolation, overcrowded multi-family units, lack of water and basic sanitation are pre-existing conditions that continue to plague the moral fabric of the U.S. In the 1960's, the Poor People's Campaign¹ and other social movements (American Indian², Chicano³) exposed pervasive poverty and racism and called for a radical redistribution of wealth, land and rights. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized economic and racial justice as the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement.⁴ Today, the COVID-19 has exposed the deep structural racism and the failure of the Trump administration and other elected officials to respond to an aggressive pandemic. In an interview with CNN, Dr. Camara Jones, a national public health expert emphasizes the gravity of the impact: "***Inequality spreads COVID 19 and COVID-19 exacerbates inequality.***⁵" This thread, left unwoven, weakens our resiliency as a nation to resist and overcome historical policies of genocide, slavery and exploitation. As a result, vulnerable populations continue to suffer the most, including the elderly, homeless, people with disabilities, immigrants in detention centers, incarcerated, racial and ethnic minorities and rural and tribal communities.

Data: A Pattern for Racial Equity

In only three months, the U.S. is now the hotspot of the global pandemic with 749,666 confirmed cases and 35,012 deaths (April 20, 2020).⁶ Our ability to tackle this tsunami of structural racism amid a major pandemic is constrained by the lack of sufficient COVID-19 data. To date, only 34 states are releasing data by race (confirmed cases, deaths, and testing). Among the available data of hospitalized COVID-19 patients, African Americans represent a third of U.S. COVID-19 fatalities but are only 12 percent of the nation's population.⁷ Among the 1,845 positive cases in New Mexico 38.1 are Native American, 24.02 are Latino, 2.56 African American and 1.58 are Asian American.⁸ The Navajo Nation alone (spanning 3 states) has 1,000 cases and 44 confirmed deaths in a population of 350,000 people. If it were a state, it would rank behind New York and New Jersey for per capita confirmed cases.⁹ While New Mexico's state and tribal leaders have taken positive steps towards slowing the *overall* growth of the virus, *the curve continues to peak for our communities of color* who have been hit the hardest. In order to assess the impact on communities of color, public health practitioners, leaders, lawmakers, philanthropists and advocates are calling for the COVID-19 related data to be collected and stratified by racial/ethnicity.



Traditional purepecha cross-stitch made by my abuela, Maria Garcia Cacari (1978)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poor_People%27s_Campaign

² <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-american-indian-movement-1968-1978>

³ Rodriguez, Roberto, (Writer) "The Origins and History of the Chicano Movement." *JSRI Occasional Paper #7*. The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1996.

⁴ <https://www.keepinspiring.me/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/>

⁵ Dr. Camara Jones, CNN Interview. https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-04-07-20/h_82cdc1a91f18f9439d6d342de2a01f7a

⁶ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/8a3430dd37e7c44290c7621f5af96d6b>

⁸ <https://cv.nmhealth.org>

⁹ <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19>

Weaving Together: Community at the Center of Social Justice

What is the path forward in a state with a long history of colonization, environmental racism, entrenched economic systems that are overly dependent on the oil and gas industries and persistent barriers to health care? Can cultural and community assets cushion some of the impact of systemic policies that make New Mexicans more vulnerable to the virus? In a time of crisis, difficult challenges often seem insurmountable when tackled alone. Core values instilled in us by our elders from many traditions teach us that “respect, humility and compassion” are necessary threads to a good life. In seeking solace, I reflect on the lessons my abuela taught me about humility. She would grab my hands and kiss them and murmur a blessing for me in Spanish. Today, this deep act of love reminds me to be humble but hopeful. Acts of love are the roots of restorative justice and healing. From this place, it is imperative that as scholars seeking to advance social justice, we place community at the forefront of our path forward.



As a first step towards healing, the TREE Center team has been reaching out to ask our community partners “How are you doing? How are you coping?” Partners have shared the ways in which communities are struggling. Heartbreaking accounts of death and mass grief, loss of jobs, managing kids at home without access to internet or computers, increased fear and depression, isolation and loneliness of elders, lack of access or inability to pay for food and supplies as well as heavier family stress and the risks for domestic violence and child abuse. In the words of a local champion in the north: ***“Our community is really feeling left out and left behind.”***

In the midst of the fray, a **common thread of hope are acts of kindness, love and collective resilience**. Youth are writing love letters to their elders and leaving them at their door. Women are making “self-care” bags with aloe sanitizer and soap and delivering them to loved ones living in remote areas. Schools and county extension offices are offering free internet access via hot spots in the parking lots where parents and children can continue to work and study out of their cars. People are donating their stimulus checks to non-profits serving those who won’t get a check due to their immigration status. Several are working with their traditional healers to bring the medicine to the people. Among our TREE Center familia, many are taking actions to support our communities such as contributing to the development of resource guides for the tribes, providing tele-behavioral health and developing COVID-19 fact sheets in multiple languages. As a center dedicated to advancing the health equity and behavioral health of all New Mexicans, we remain in solidarity with our communities.

Moving forward, we can mend our brokenness. The cloth of social justice is stitched with our interwoven threads of strength, courage and resilience.