

Going Beyond Acknowledgment

A Guide to Developing an Actionable Land Acknowledgment



MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR HEALTH

for the New Mexico County and Tribal Health Councils
and other healthcare agencies and organizations

June 2023

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While American Indians and Alaskan Natives make up 1.3% of the U.S. population, Native Americans make up 11.2% of New Mexico's population. Our communities have a different experience with colonization than anywhere else in the nation. State-Tribal relations have existed in New Mexico for nearly 500 years and we see (and feel) the effects of colonization in every aspect of our lives.

Native Nations feel this much more acutely than anyone. In theory, the country has entered a period of Tribal Self-Determination. Yet, indigenous people are still impacted by the periods of Colonization, Termination, and Assimilation. The pandemic highlighted the disparities as Native Americans experienced higher mortality rates from COVID-19 (Leggat-Barr, 2021), decreased life expectancy (CDC, 2022), and increased rates of suicide (Stone 2023).


The State-Tribal Collaboration Act of 2009 was landmark legislation that has served as a national model for institutionalizing mutually beneficial policies and protocols between State and Tribal governments. New Mexico has also been on a path to finding the best models for improving health outcomes, starting with the Maternal & Child Health Act of 1978. In 2019, the state merged these two ideals and enacted the County and Tribal Health Councils Act, which promoted a collaboration and partnership between Health Councils and the New Mexico Department of Health to focus on local-level health initiatives, assessment, planning, and implementation in communities. Global and federal initiatives are following suit by focusing strategic plans and initiatives on the social determinants of health and ensuring services are equitable.

In order to advance health equity, government agencies must systematically address power imbalances, racism, and other forms of oppression by updating policies and transforming how they work internally, with communities, and alongside other government agencies. It requires the involvement of community organizations, grassroots organizations, businesses, civil groups, and individuals from across every sector.

The work being done by the County and Tribal Health Councils to advance health equity - including building internal capacity and fostering strategic community partnerships - has put you in a unique position. With the right resources and adequate support, you will be the agencies that catalyze the transformational changes that are necessary for creating an equitable and healthy future and strengthening Tribal and State government relations.



INTRODUCTION



This Land Acknowledgment Guide and the corresponding Toolkit were designed as tools to help New Mexico County and Tribal Health Councils work on actionable plans, forge new partnerships, and create health initiatives. The online Land Acknowledgment Toolkit was designed with Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) as the framework. It will help guide your group through the process of writing a land acknowledgment statement, provides information about Tribal Nations in New Mexico, and shares other resources to help you go beyond acknowledgment. This is a process that requires self-learning, reflection, and discussion, because health initiatives will be more effective when we:

- ▲ **Recognize the degree to which colonization has harmed the land and people,**
- ▲ **Understand that trauma impacts all parts of a person - physical, spiritual, social, intellectual, and emotional and this trauma response can be passed onto future generations,**
- ▲ **Integrate the values, beliefs, and practices of a harmed community into the development of initiatives to help them heal, and**
- ▲ **Recognize that the work you have done has primed the County and Tribal Health Councils for being the leadership that can activate positive change at every level and across all sectors.**

Collaborative skills for effectively addressing health disparities in ethnically diverse communities are best learned in an environment of cultural humility (Harrigan & Emery, 2010). Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection, self-critique, and commitment to understanding and respecting different points of view and engaging with others humbly, authentically, and from a place of learning. This is the approach used in developing this Land Acknowledgment Guide and the accompanying Toolkit. This is a process that requires personal and group commitment and will be most effective with the inclusion and engagement of people at every level of your organization and with input from the community. The Guide and Toolkit are tools to aid in reflection, sharing ideas, creating meaningful opportunities for engagement, and planning for the future. It is a necessary step for implementing transformative change.

Valeria Alarcón
Executive Director
New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils



Gila National Wilderness Area, Catron and Grant Counties

THE LAND

There is no denying the grand beauty of the New Mexico landscape. Whether you have been here for one day or your people have lived here for thousands of years, you will find yourself gazing in awe at the geodiversity and epic, unadulterated vistas.

Artists have long tried to replicate the raw, unique beauty of dusk and dawn painting the earth and sky with dynamic colors and shifting light. We can sit on dry, rough earth, under a sea of stars while watching lightning storms race across the horizon. And we can dance in rainbows made by the golden light that shines through a five-minute rainfall. The state is home to other-worldly landforms and is riddled with secret oases of desert water. This land has been the inspiration for great art and great acts - such as making the Gila the first federally designated wilderness area in the world.

This land becomes a part of the identity of all who live here. No matter what faith you adhere to, if you live in New Mexico, the land and sky is your church and your time spent in nature is time spent with the creator to reflect on the interconnectedness of all things. For those whose family has lived here for many generations, the natural world is sacred and allows us to connect with ancestors. This land was a part of them, it is a part of you, and it will become a part of all future generations.





LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT GOALS

A Land Acknowledgment is ultimately not about land, but about people. It is not merely a message showing respect, but a process of learning which will allow you to find respectful ways to strengthen relationships. The ultimate goal is to create the framework and build the organizational knowledge necessary for improving the health and well-being of everyone in our communities. This includes:

- ▲ **Building trust between the State, Native Nations, and community partners**
- ▲ **Identifying problems and solutions through ongoing, meaningful engagement and mutually beneficial collaborations**
- ▲ **Recognizing the complexity of historical truths and addressing the false narratives and unconscious biases with confidence and compassion**
- ▲ **Referencing and honoring the people - past and present - when engaging in capacity building, community assessments, health initiatives, partnerships, and policy work**
- ▲ **Creating safe, inclusive, equitable spaces as a key step to building a culture of health**

This process includes creating a written statement. It should be approached not as a set of obligatory words that we need to rush through nor a tool to promote your group. Rather, it is a part of the process of understanding and atonement. As such, the written land acknowledgment should include your call to action or a declaration of what you commit to doing.

PLACE IT IN CONTEXT

Every narrative that is told is contextual. We each listen and speak using our unique perspectives, shaped by our experiences. This Guide puts forth the following as a clear and decisive point of reference to use while writing your land acknowledgment. The ideas and feelings you express in your land acknowledgment should be said within this context. Your group can adjust this, as long as the reference you use is truthful.

The Spanish, British, French, and Dutch profited from the land and resources they stole from the people who were indigenous to the Americas, and they did this by murdering tens of millions of people as well as causing their ongoing displacement, imprisonment, enslavement, forced religious conversion, abduction, and sterilization, as well as attempts to destroy their cultures. The United States was able to become a world power because of the stolen resources and, in order to maintain their position, they continued to steal land and build systems that helped perpetuate the subjugation and oppression of people of color. Now, representatives from all three forms of government in the United States - Federal, State, and Tribal - are working to help communities recover and rebuild systems so as to prevent further harm.



SELF-LEARNING & GROUP DIALOGUE

The Toolkit provides resources to give you a starting point for self-learning and prompts to guide group discussion. Learning about unique Tribal customs, relationships to place, traumatic events, and unique experiences of colonization can allow for deeper understanding of why historical trauma has an impact on health outcomes and may show you where policies and laws need to change or help you generate ideas for initiatives that will be effective in helping communities heal.

INTENTIONAL LANGUAGE

As you find the best way to express your ideas, the discussion may focus on the varied meaning of words. This discussion has value because words matter. But we also have our unique perspectives and so words will carry different meanings for different people. A word or phrase you believe is complimentary may take on a different meaning when viewed within the context.

Take, for example, '**stewards of the land**' - a phrase that is frequently used in land acknowledgments.

One perspective is that, traditionally, Native Americans were stewards of the land. Another view is that the phrase honors the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection that Native Americans have with the land. It references the fact that Native Americans did not view land as a commodity that could be bought and sold but rather they believe all people are responsible for caring for the land. And, yet another perspective is seen when we consider the definition of 'steward' as someone who is responsible for the care of someone else's property. In this instance, the phrase 'stewards of the land' ignores the trust responsibility of the United States.

Language choice is a good topic on which to request advice from the Native Nations in your communities.

DOCTRINE OF TRUST RESPONSIBILITY

Trust responsibility is the unique but well-established responsibility of the United States to Tribal Nations, the purpose of which is to ensure the survival and welfare of Indian tribes and people. The United States has the highest moral obligation and a legally enforceable fiduciary responsibility to protect treaty rights, to ensure the protection of Tribal lands, assets, and resources, and to honor Tribal sovereignty.





Brazos Cliffs, Tulas Mountains, Rio Arriba County

PURPOSE

Land Acknowledgments began as statements written by Land Grant colleges and universities starting in the 1970s. Land Grant colleges were given land stolen from Native Americans and this land was used for their on-going profit - at times when Native Americans were denied access to that education. Over time, land acknowledgments have been written by Native and non-Native organizations, businesses, public institutions, and nonprofits. They have been spoken to kick-off events, posted on websites, and sent as formal letters.

At their worst, Land Acknowledgments have been performative actions, have shared false or misleading information, or have been void of any meaning. At their best, they have educated the public, started dialogue, or have been a valuable part of direct action calling for change.

By transforming the development of your Land Acknowledgment into an inquiry-based and community-based process, you will be changing your organizational culture and you will make strides in your work to advance health equity.

In the corresponding section of the Toolkit, your group can read and discuss sample acknowledgments as well as discuss ideas around your group's motivations and goals, who you will name in your acknowledgment, and how you will use your Land Acknowledgment.



Chain of Craters Wilderness Study Area, Cibola County



NATIVE NATIONS

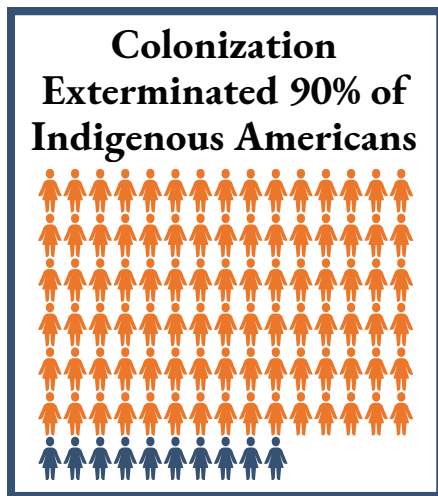
There are 23 federally recognized Tribal Nations in New Mexico, including the Navajo Nation, Jicarilla Apache Nation, Mescalero Apache Tribe, Fort Sill Apache Tribe, and the 19 Pueblos - Acoma, Cochiti, Isleta, Jemez, Kewa, Laguna, Nambe, Ohkay Owingeh, Picuris, Pojoaque, Sandia, San Felipe, San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, Tamaya, Taos, Tesuque, Zia, and Zuni. Each tribe is a sovereign nation, with its own government, beliefs, social structure, art, and experience of colonization. New Mexico is also home to a large number of Native Americans who are members of Tribes from across the country.

These are the Native Americans you work with today. But there are many more tribes for you to learn about - whether they merged with another tribe or they were displaced, disbanded, or destroyed. These are people who have historically been on this land and their experience of colonization needs to be acknowledged.

In the corresponding section of the Toolkit you will find brief profiles for each of the federally recognized tribes in New Mexico as well as for three chapters of the Navajo Nation because of their distinct relationship to the Tribe and their unique histories in New Mexico. The Toolkit also shares information about several tribes who once had a presence in New Mexico, because their stories are also imprinted on this land.



According to recent research, **the colonization of the Americas is the largest human mortality event in known history.** (Koch 2019) It caused the deaths of 55 million people indigenous to the Americas - the equivalent of 10% of the world population at that time.



The devastation of colonization impacted people around the world, yet most people in the United States are taught very little about Native American history. The history that is taught is revisionist and perpetuates stereotypes. These stereotypes lead to unconscious bias and ongoing cycles of discrimination and racism. Even in New Mexico, the narrative told to youth is restricted to that of the Spanish explorer.

The research referenced above highlights the extreme violence perpetrated against Native people by viewing colonization in a global context. Your Land Acknowledgment will need to incorporate historic events specific to your communities. The corresponding section of the Toolkit includes a timeline of important national and local events, actions, treaties, and laws, from before colonization to present day.



White Sands National Park, Doña Ana County and Otero County

Historical trauma is the cumulative, multigenerational experience of emotional and psychological injury in harmed communities. Intergenerational trauma is the theory that trauma can be inherited through the genetic changes that can occur during trauma response (but these alterations are reversible.) This section shares statistics related to each of the social determinants of health. It is a sampling of tangible evidence of the impact colonization continues to have on indigenous communities.

Examining a violent past and the ongoing suffering it causes can be difficult in different ways for everyone. Engaging in these discussions in a professional setting can be especially difficult for those who have a personal connection because it is both distressing and emotionally exhausting.

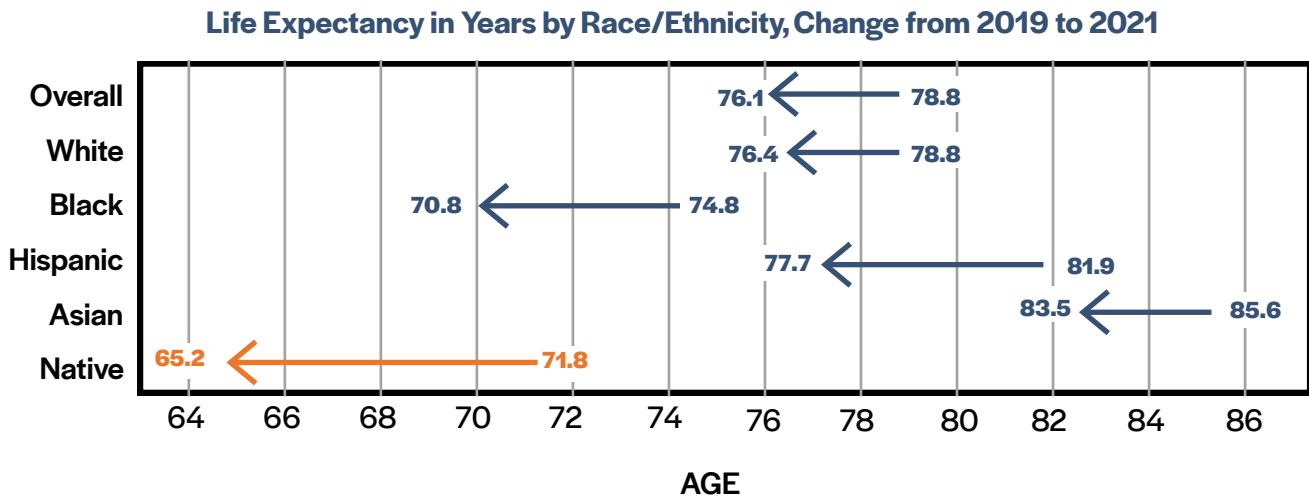
For this to be part of a process of individual and collective healing, it is important to consider the potential harm such dialogues can cause. Even though you are looking at historic events, colonization is not a historical artifact. It is a current reality.

Both the discussions among your group and your work within the community should follow the ethos of medicine: **"first, do no harm."**

COLONIZATION & SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Native Americans living on tribal lands do not have access to the same services and programs available to other Americans, even though the government has a binding trust obligation to provide them.

HEALTH & HEALTHCARE ACCESS



(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)

EDUCATION ACCESS & QUALITY

The following shows the percentage of Native American youth in New Mexico who are proficient in each topic.

READING
20%
 compared to
 21% statewide &
 32% nationally in 2022

MATH
14%
 compared to
 25% statewide &
 26% nationally in 2022

SCIENCE
21%
 compared to
 21% statewide &
 33% nationally in 2015

(Public School Review, 2023. Nation's Report Card, 2023. New Mexico Public Education Department, 2022.)

NEIGHBORHOODS & BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

17%
NEW MEXICO'S
HOMELESS
POPULATION
THAT IS NATIVE
AMERICAN

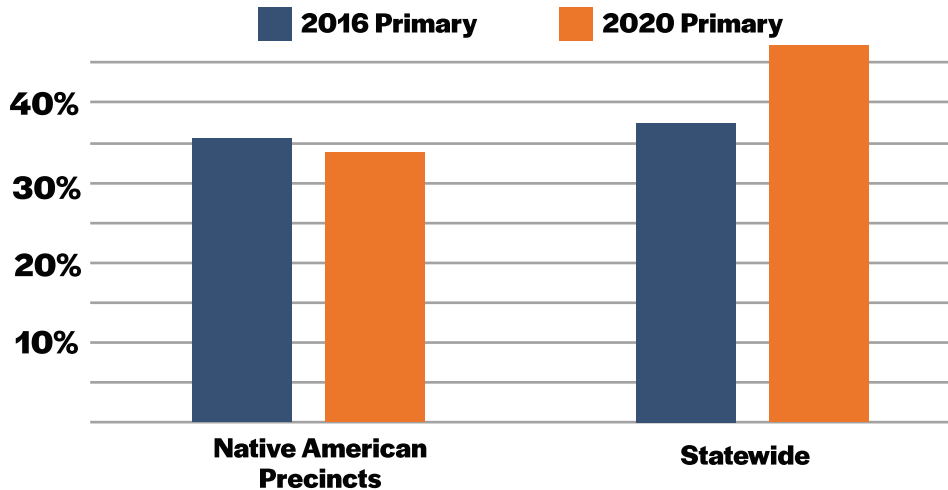
30%
NAVAJO
FAMILIES WITH
NO ACCESS TO
RUNNING WATER

30%
NATIVE
AMERICANS IN
NEW MEXICO
WITH NO
INTERNET AT
HOME/WORK

DigDeep, 2023. Associated Press, 2023. New Mexico Indian Affairs Department, 2020)

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY

NEW MEXICO VOTER PARTICIPATION



(Common Cause New Mexico, 2020)

ECONOMIC STABILITY

32.5%
NATIVE
AMERICANS IN
NEW MEXICO
LIVING IN
POVERTY

40%
NAVAJO
CHILDREN
LIVING IN
POVERTY IN NM
compared to 25% of
children statewide

11.1%
UNEMPLOYED
NATIVE
AMERICANS
compared to
4.4% average

(World Population Review, 2023. NM-IBIS, 2023. Brookings, 2022).



Rio Grande, Alcalde, Rio Arriba County



POSSIBILITIES

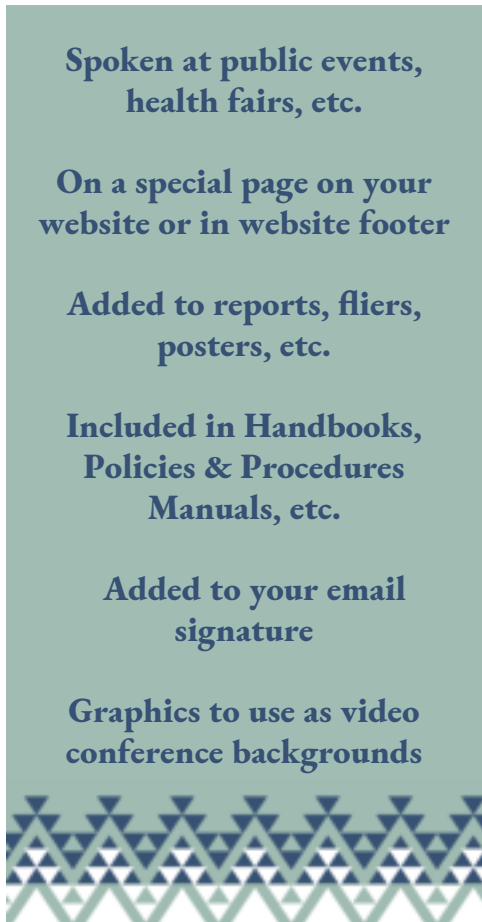
It can become difficult to envision a future of health built from trusting and supportive collaborative partnerships when confronting our past. Historical and transgenerational trauma and systemic oppression have wreaked havoc on indigenous communities. Yet, it has also led to communities developing stronger spiritual and social ties while promoting cultural resilience.

As you learn more about your communities, remember to not only focus your attention on the atrocities and ensuing pain. Make note of the many examples of tribal communities and Native American individuals who have great intellect and talent, compassion and generosity, and strength and resilience.

The future is filled with possibilities. Remember that everyone at the table is participating in this process with good intentions and a desire to improve the lives of all people in our communities. Embrace the idea that multiple systems of thinking and people from different backgrounds can work together in building an equitable, healthy future. View this work as a vital part of overcoming the pain of our past and transcending to create an equitable world.

WAYS TO USE YOUR LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Below are ways in which you can use your written Land Acknowledgment as well as suggestions on how to make your land acknowledgment actionable.



These are by no means complete lists and you are encouraged to brainstorm other ways you can use your land acknowledgments. Consider the ways your land acknowledgment can change how data is presented, how it can inspire change in legislation, how it can shift the ideas and attitudes of individuals, or how it can bring groups together to create innovative initiatives. And, remember that:

“Housing policy is health policy. Educational policy is health policy. Anti-violence policy is health policy. Neighborhood improvement policies are health policies. Everything that we can do to improve the quality of life of individuals in our society has an impact on their health and is a health policy.”

(Compton & Shim, 2015)

PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS SECTORS

EXAMPLE

The first step to overcoming lack of access to health care is examining the specific individual barriers, such as lack of insurance or challenges navigating the healthcare system. By using your Land Acknowledgment as a reference, it may help in determining the cause of those barriers or reveal barriers not previously considered. This, in turn, will help to develop innovative solutions that involve multiple agencies across multiple sectors.

Below are real examples of barriers faced by Native Americans and the social determinant of health that they fall under. The second column lists ideas on agencies or organizations that *could* be involved with creating a solution for overcoming that barrier. Column three shows *purely hypothetical* ideas of solutions that could be created. These are merely examples to show how the process could work.

Barrier & SDOH	Potential Partners	Possible Response
Unemployment <i>Economic Stability</i>	Workforce Solutions	Training the Call Center Staff on Unconscious Bias so as to improve experiences of unemployed Native Americans
Rural Homes & Lack of Transportation <i>Neighborhoods & Health Care</i>	Dept. of Transportation, Workforce Solutions, Private Funders	Increase broadband internet to allow for TeleHealth in rural areas; Create ride service to take people to and from health appointments
Language <i>Health Care</i>	Secretary of State translators for voting	Translation service during doctor visits

As you work with communities to determine the barriers they face, consider all the agencies that can potentially be involved in creating a solution.



Mó-ha-loh (Pueblo Peak), Taos County



Every land acknowledgment will look different. There is no set formula for writing a land acknowledgment, but there are specific points to include and ideas to consider.

- 1 Name the Native Nations you are acknowledging. Use their preferred names and correct spelling and pronunciation.**
- 2 Acknowledge the history of colonization and the theft of land.**
- 3 Acknowledge the present-day lived experiences of Native Americans and the on-going ways in which colonization harms Tribal communities.**
- 4 State your purpose and motivations for sharing this statement.**
- 5 State the ways in which you are committed to supporting and empowering Native Nations.**



New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils humbly recognizes and acknowledges we are on unceded territory and ancestral lands of the original peoples of New Mexico's Pueblos, Apache Nations, and the Navajo Nation. Together, we acknowledge the history of genocide, dispossession, colonization and ongoing systemic inequities, while strengthening and respecting relationships with Indigenous peoples.

We give thanks to the past, present, and future stewards of this land and respect all tribal nation's sovereignty. In offering this Land Acknowledgment, we affirm Indigenous resiliency, self-determination, and self-governance of New Mexico's tribes and nations who are still here today.

This Land Acknowledgment Guide and the companion Toolkit were created with the support of Alexis Brown (Issi Chunkash) of DH Solutions. She is a New Mexico-born citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, from the Watonlak Oshi “White Crane” Clan.

DH Solutions honors the many indigenous people who had their lives, land, and culture forcibly taken. I grieve for the lives that were lost across the Americas, for those separated from their land and ancestors, and for those who continue to suffer. My path of healing is inspired by my ancestors' strength of spirit, astounding resiliency, and commitment to living with compassion for all people. I entreat my ancestors to guide me so my work will always be done in the Chahta spirit.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT TOOLKIT

This Land Acknowledgment Guide should be utilized in conjunction with the online Land Acknowledgment Toolkit. This can be accessed at:

<https://www.nmhealthcouncils.org/land-acknowledgment-toolkit>



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