

American Indian/Alaska Native Oral Health Summary  
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### **American Indian/Alaska Natives in Oregon**

In 2010, 109,223 American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) were living in Oregon, which represented about 3% of the total state population. Most of Oregon's AI/AN population were living in counties that overlap with tribal lands and/or that have large urban centers.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, there are nine federally recognized tribes in Oregon.

### **Data on American Indians/Alaska Natives**

According to the 2014 Oral Health IHS Survey in the Portland Area, 53.2% of AI/AN children under age 5 experienced tooth decay; and 31% of AI/AN children under age 5 had untreated tooth decay.<sup>2</sup> A 2016 IHS Oral Health Survey revealed that in the Portland Area, 64% of adults aged 35-49 had untreated tooth decay and 54% of adults aged 50-64 had untreated tooth decay and 83% had missing teeth<sup>3</sup>.

### **Access Issues for American Indians/Alaska Natives**

Many AI/AN utilize the Indian Health Service (IHS), tribal or urban (I/T/U) clinics for primary care and often have limited access to dental services and other services. This is due to chronic underfunding of the Indian health system by the federal government, which has a trust responsibility to provide healthcare to AI/AN. From 2006-2012, fewer AI/AN in Oregon reported having a dental visit in the past year compared to non-Hispanic

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<sup>1</sup> Oregon American Indian/Alaska Native Community Health Profile, [http://www.npaihb.org/wpfb-file/healthprofile2014-or-thp-final\\_full-report-pdf/](http://www.npaihb.org/wpfb-file/healthprofile2014-or-thp-final_full-report-pdf/)

<sup>2</sup> The Oral Health of American Indian and Alaska Native Children Aged 1-5 Years: Results of the 2014 IHS Oral Health Survey (Kathy R. Phipps and Timothy L. Ricks, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> IHS Data Brief March 2016 The Oral Health of American Indian and Alaska Native Adult Dental Patients: Results of the 2015 IHS Oral Health Survey [https://www.ihs.gov/DOH/documents/IHS\\_Data\\_Brief\\_March\\_2016\\_Oral\\_Health%20Survey\\_35\\_plus.pdf](https://www.ihs.gov/DOH/documents/IHS_Data_Brief_March_2016_Oral_Health%20Survey_35_plus.pdf)

whites in the state.<sup>4</sup>

Six of the nine federally recognized tribes in Oregon offer dental services at an IHS or tribal clinic. IHS dental programs primarily provide prevention services, basic restorative, emergency, and some higher level services but tribal dental programs provide a wider range of services. Most of the IHS and tribal programs are unable to adequately serve the populations they serve and many have long waits for dental appointments. Two tribes will be implementing a dental health aide therapy (DHAT) program in 2017 under Oregon demonstration project authority.

### **Barriers to Care for American Indians/Alaska Natives**

Tribal members experience a variety of barriers to oral health care. A shortage of dentists in tribal communities, geographic isolation, and the cost of care are common in tribal and non-tribal communities. In Oregon, historical trauma, a history of sporadic and/or painful/distressing care, and a lack of culturally competent providers exacerbate the other common barriers many communities of color face. Finally, in Oregon, very few oral health providers are willing to accept Medicaid coverage and there is a lack of a strong safety-net. The delivery system is not set up to address the variety of barriers faced by Tribal communities.

### **Solution for American Indians/Alaska Natives**

For over 10 years, Alaska Natives have had access to dental health aide therapists (DHATs), a mid-level, primary oral health provider with a limited scope of practice. This has reduced dental caries and improved overall oral health among the Alaska Native population. DHATs are selected by their communities, go through an intensive two-year program, and return home to serve their communities. Two tribes in Oregon have demonstration project authority and will be implementing a DHAT program in 2017.

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<sup>4</sup> Oregon American Indian/Alaska Native Community Health Profile, [http://www.npaihb.org/wpfb-file/healthprofile2014-or-thp-final\\_full-report-pdf/](http://www.npaihb.org/wpfb-file/healthprofile2014-or-thp-final_full-report-pdf/)