



UMB News

COVID-19 Vaccine Available for Native Americans at UMB

April 21, 2021 | By [Charles Schelle](#)

Among the most treasured gifts of family are the stories that are passed down from generation to generation. The spoken tales and traditions woven through time can resonate so deeply that they personify someone's heritage.

COVID-19 has posed a grave threat to stop that flow of cultural richness in the Native American community across the country, where in some areas they have faced the highest COVID-19 mortality rate compared to any other ethnicity. The community is encouraging each other to protect themselves by getting a COVID-19 vaccine and practicing all the public safety measures.

"If somebody's the last person that knows a ceremonial song and they get COVID and pass away, that ceremonial song goes with them," said Kerry Hawk-Lessard, executive director of Native American LifeLines of Baltimore, a federally designated Urban Indian Health Program that helps Indigenous people with access to culturally centered health care. "There are some things that you can't replace."



National Council of Urban Indian Health CEO Francys Crevier receives her first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine from Isabel Sangiorgi, a University of Maryland School of Nursing student who is volunteering as a vaccinators at the University of Maryland, Baltimore Vaccination Clinic. MATTHEW PAUL D'AGOSTINO/UMB

That's why you'll see Francys Crevier wear a mask with the phrase: "Be A Good Relative."

Crevier, who is Algonquin, received her first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) Vaccination Clinic, 601 W. Lombard St., on Friday, April 16. She is also the chief executive officer of the National Council of Urban Indian Health.

"Native people, we are dying at

the highest rates. It's important for our community," said Crevier. "It's our livelihood here. We have a 'Be A Good Relative' campaign because it's important that our families are being taken care of, and this is how we get that done through being vaccinated."

Crevier was able to get her vaccine, provided exclusively for Native Americans thanks to a partnership between UMB, the Indian Health Service (IHS), and Native American LifeLines of Baltimore.

"It's so surreal," Crevier said.

American Indians, Alaskan Natives, tribal employees, employees of Indian agencies, and people living with Native Americans are all eligible for the vaccine at the UMB clinic. This is the only clinic of its kind in the region, accepting Native Americans from Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Registration can be made at [GetTheVaccineBaltimore.org](https://www.getthevaccinebaltimore.org). Native Americans who need technical help for scheduling, transportation assistance, or other information can call Native American LifeLines of Baltimore at 410-837-2258. Tribal enrollment cards and alternative forms of identification are being accepted at the clinic, and Native American LifeLines can assist in securing identification.

"It will take all of us working together to end COVID-19. The University of Maryland, Baltimore has been involved in the development of COVID-19 vaccines and is now administering those same vaccines," said UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**. "We want to do our part to get as many people vaccinated as possible — and especially those who are disproportionately affected by the illness or have difficulty with access."

More than 65,000 Native Americans live in the Baltimore-Washington-Northern Virginia metropolitan region, and 70 percent of Native Americans live in urban regions in the U.S. While vaccine eligibility in general is open to anyone age 16 and older, this joint effort sponsored by a federal agency is an example of vaccine

equity distribution to reach populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19, providing another access point to get Native Americans vaccinated as soon as possible.

“UMB is dedicated to vaccine equity and making sure that all individuals who want access to the vaccine are provided access,” said **Jonathan Bratt, MS, NRP**, executive director of the Office of Emergency Management at UMB. “We’re doing that through a number of initiatives: Partnerships with the Esperanza Center reaching out to Spanish-speaking populations; through the Indian Health Service reaching out to Native American populations; and with our Community Engagement Center to go door-to-door in the West Baltimore community to make sure people understand where they can get vaccinated.”

Native Americans have a dedicated federal agency, IHS, to protect their health through culturally competent public health programs and services through three arms: IHS-operated facilities, and tribally operated and nonprofit organizations that are designated Urban Indian Health Programs such as Native American LifeLines. IHS has a number of partnerships that ensure access to health care for American Indians and Alaskan Natives no matter where they live, with the UMB partnership being the latest one by providing COVID-19 doses directly to the UMB Vaccination Clinic for the population IHS serves.

“There are many American Indians and Alaska Natives who live and work in urban areas without close access to Indian health system clinical services, including those who serve tribal communities through public service in the federal government and our many partner organizations,” acting IHS director Elizabeth Fowler said. “Providing equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines continues to be a priority as we work to achieve community immunity.”

Protecting the culture is a key part of this endeavor. Hawk-Lessard said she got the vaccine to protect others and to show that it is safe and effective.

“I’m glad that I am able to be protected and continue language learning, learning the Indigenous language of my relatives who weren’t able speak it. I’m able to speak it and learn it now. If I were able to get ill, that journey would stop, and I don’t want that to happen.”

UMB is committed to recognizing the Native American heritage and sacrifice in Baltimore. It’s fitting that the clinic is housed at the Southern Management Corporation (SMC) Campus Center, where UMB has acknowledged the land that the center sits on through a land statement that is adorned on the second-floor wall: “The SMC Campus Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore would like to recognize the Indigenous Peoples who lived on the land where our building stands. Through this effort we aim to promote Indigenous visibility and encourage support of Indigenous communities.”

Rose Weakhee, director of the Office of Urban Indian Health Programs at IHS, oversees the 41 urban Indian organizations in 22 states across the country. Ensuring access to all tribes is important, she said. Baltimore’s Lumbee tribe is the largest in the area, and has met barriers without being a federally recognized or state recognized tribe. For Weakhee, who is Navajo, the endeavor is personal.

“You’ve probably heard in the news how devastating the pandemic has been on our reservation,” she said. “To me, it’s really an emotional experience to see our relatives in Baltimore have access to the vaccine and save more lives.”

There is some hope in the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Department of Health reported no COVID-19-related deaths for nine consecutive days. Recently, it reported certain days without a single new COVID case. Lately, Navajos averaged 11 cases a day, a significant drop from the peak of 250 a day in November among its 300,000 members.

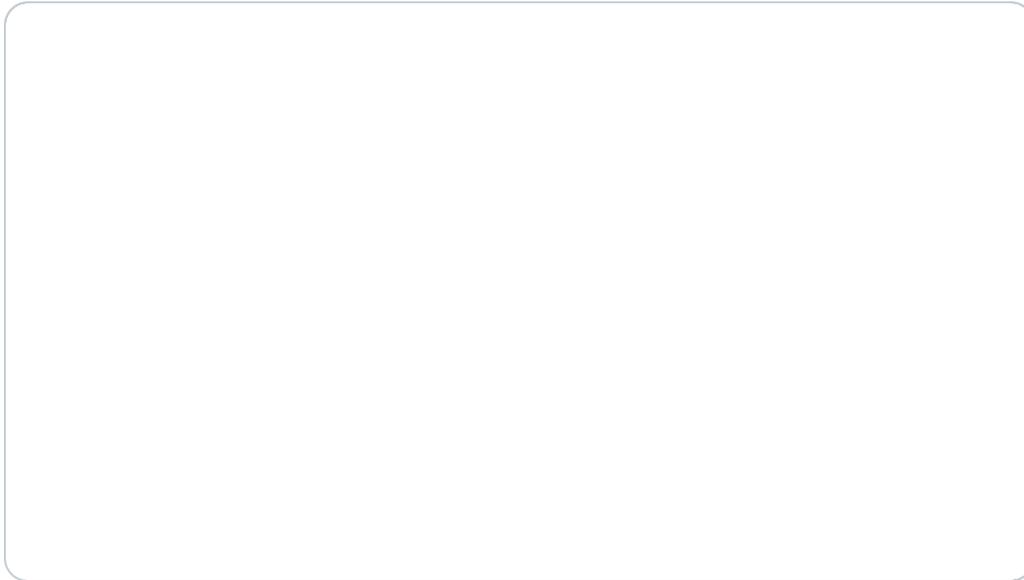
The UMB Vaccination Clinic partnership could help pave the way to ensure more tribes can go a day without a COVID case and a COVID death.



Charles Schelle ✓
@ImYourChuck



“It’s really surreal that I’m standing here and able to have access to the vaccine. It’s literally saving my life.” - Francys Crevier of [@NCUIH_Official](#) at [@UMBaltimore](#) Vaccination Clinic for Native Americans in partnership with [@IHSgov](#). [GetTheVaccineBaltimore.org](#)



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