

# Amplifying health equity & finding local heroes



Tescha Hawley and Nora Mabie  
Photos by Ben Allan Smith

2013 state report: Native Americans die 20 years earlier than their white peers

10 years later...  
what has changed?



# ADVICE: “Don’t just cover the disparities. We’re tired of hearing about the disparities.”

- How to do this with care?
  - Listening sessions
  - Surveys, community outreach
  - Not extractive journalism
  - Solutions focus (What can be done and who is doing the work?)



Language matters!

# NORA MABIE



LEE ENTERPRISES

Indigenous Communities Reporter

## Is your family's average life expectancy under 65 years of age?

I want to hear from you.

According to the latest Montana Department of Health and Human Services report, Native Americans in the state have shorter life spans than non-Natives residents. I am reporting on the factors that contribute to the difference and what could close the gap.

**TRIBAL COMMUNITIES:** Please consider filling out this survey so we can research, collaborate and learn more about this life-changing issue. You know your community best, and I'd love to learn from you, so our news can better serve you.

**How responses will be used and shared:** Information shared in this survey will be kept confidential unless I reach out to you and receive permission for it to be published.

**Connect with me:** I can be reached via my [Facebook page](#), by phone at 406-403-3570 or by email at [Nora.Mabie@lee.net](mailto:Nora.Mabie@lee.net).

**More about me:** I cover Indigenous communities for the Missoulian, Billings Gazette, Helena Independent Record, Montana Standard and Ravalli Republic. I've been covering tribal communities in Montana for four years, and I am a 2023 USC Annenberg [Center for Health Journalism National Fellow](#).

# Montana Indian Reservations



72 interviews,  
3,105 miles traveled,  
296 Indigenous people in MT provided input

Missoulian | 6 BELLEVILLE GAZETTE | RAVALLI REPUBLIC | THE MONTANA STANDARD | Independent Record

## GONE TOO SOON

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES IN INDIAN COUNTRY?

A collage of four photographs. The top row shows three people in a home setting: a woman in a black shirt, a woman in a blue denim jacket, and a man in a colorful patterned shirt. The bottom row shows a memorial with flowers and a sign for Fort Belknap, and a silhouette of a person on a horse against a sunset background.

Photos by Ben Allan Smith, Antonio Ibarra Olivares, Amy Lynn Nelson

**STORIES BY NORA MABIE**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
**USCAnnenberg**  
Center for Health Journalism

# HERE'S WHAT I FOUND

Average age of death in Montana from 2018 to 2022

- White Montanans: 78 years old
- Native Americans in Montana: 61 years old
- Rural White Montanans: 78 years old



# 3 STORIES, 3 WOMEN



# FILLING THE GAPS IN A BROKEN SYSTEM

## One woman's mission to improve health outcomes on the Fort Belknap Reservation

Originally published Jan. 30, 2024

**NORA MADIE**  
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**FORT BELKNAP RESERVATION** – Less than 200 feet from her driveway on a morning in August, the retired cop car Tescha Hawley drives for work began to slow. Hundreds of people waited on the other end.

"Oh no," she said. "No, no, no."

She pulled into a neighbor's driveway just as the 1988 Crown Victoria died.

"I don't have time for sh— to break down," Hawley said, hitting her hand against the steering wheel. "I have too much to do!"

Life expectancy is Hawley's mission. Herself a cancer survivor, she knows death comes too soon for Indigenous people in America and even sooner for people on the Fort Belknap Reservation in north-central Montana where she lives.

Frustrated by a health care system that consistently fails Indigenous people and elected officials who don't seem to prioritize the issue, individuals like Hawley often work to fill gaps in the system. While her mission isn't easy, Hawley knows her efforts save lives.

That's why on this particular summer morning, Hawley planned to distribute tens of thousands of pounds of fresh produce to her community. It's why she drives people to medical appointments and hands

out gas cards. It's why she helps community members navigate a complex medical system and encourages them to seek preventive care. And why she launched her nonprofit, Day Eagle Hope Project, which recently received national recognition.

Native Americans have the lowest life expectancy of any racial or ethnic group in the U.S. And in Montana, where Native Americans comprise 6.7% of the population, Indigenous people die a generation younger than their white neighbors.

Experts say inadequate care, food deserts, discrimination at the doctor's office, oppressive policies, poverty and rurality are among the factors contributing to the crisis. And while tribal leaders have raised the issue for years, they say improving health outcomes simply isn't a priority among state and federal leaders.

From 2018 to 2022, white Montanans died on average at 78, and Native Americans in the state typically died 17 years sooner at 61. On the Fort Belknap Reservation, the gap widens. The most recent county health assessment reveals that on the reservation, Native men die, on average, at 56. In the same county, white men typically live 27 years longer.

Hawley — like others who do this work in tribal communities statewide — is up against intense barriers. She doesn't have a proper food storage facility or a central distribution point. Hawley has no full-time staff.



PHOTOS BY BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Tescha Hawley has made it her life's mission to improve life expectancy on the Fort Belknap Reservation. Through her work with Day Eagle Hope Project, a nonprofit she launched, Hawley aims to provide resources including fresh produce, gas cards and travel for those in need of medical attention across the reservation. "I'm just a gap filler," she said. "But sometimes it feels like I am the filler."

### Median age at death

The average age at death for a Native American man in Blaine County, which overlaps with the Fort Belknap Reservation, is nearly 30 years less than white residents.



Source: 2022 Blaine County Community Health Assessment. Data is from 2018-2023.  
Lee Enterprises graphic



Buster Moore helps distribute boxes of produce to people in Hays, a town 35 miles south of the distribution hub for Day Eagle Project in Fort Belknap Agency. While there are a handful of convenience stores on the reservation, residents often must travel to an Albertsons grocery store just outside the reservation for healthy food. Depending on where one lives on the reservation, a trip to that store could be 40 miles each way.











# This CNN Hero's battle with cancer inspired her lifesaving work helping families in her Native American community

By Allie Torgan, CNN

🕒 5 minute read · Published 7:15 AM EDT, Fri August 18, 2023





**FORT BELKNAP**  
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