



American Indian  
Cancer Foundation.

2024

&

2025

**BIENNIAL REPORT**

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# INTRODUCTION

Relatives,

It is with deep gratitude that I share with you the American Indian Cancer Foundation's 2024-2025 Biennial Report. As a Native-led, Native-serving organization, our work is rooted in the strength of our communities, the wisdom of our ancestors, and the responsibility we carry to future generations.

Over the last two years, we have continued to grow, not just in programs or reach, but in relationships, trust, and impact. Cancer continues to be a devastating and disproportionate burden for American Indian and Alaska Native people. Yet, alongside this reality, there is also resilience, innovation, and an unwavering commitment from our communities to care for one another. This report reflects both truths.

As a national organization, we have expanded our technical assistance, community education, and culturally grounded prevention efforts across Indian Country. We have partnered with Tribal Nations, urban Indian organizations, health systems, researchers, and community leaders to ensure that cancer prevention, screening, and survivorship resources are not only accessible but respectful, relevant, and rooted in Indigenous values. From community events and awareness campaigns to policy engagement and workforce training, our work continues to put community voices at the center.

This biennium has also been a period of internal growth and reflection. Our team has evolved, welcoming new staff who bring fresh perspectives alongside longtime leaders who carry institutional knowledge and deep community connections. Together, we have strengthened our infrastructure, refined our strategies, and remained accountable to our mission: to eliminate cancer disparities and create a future where Native people no longer face inequitable outcomes.

I am continually inspired by the stories shared with us by survivors, caregivers, youth, Elders, and partners who remind us why this work matters. None of what you see in this report would be possible without the dedication of our staff, the guidance of our Board of Directors, the trust of our community partners, and the generosity of funders, donors, and supporters who believe in Indigenous-led solutions.

We are grateful to the partners and funders who invest in specific programs and initiatives. Those resources help demonstrate what is possible. To continue growing our impact as a national organization, we also rely on unrestricted support that strengthens our ability to respond when communities call, sustain a strong Native-led team, and carry our work forward in a consistent and accountable way.

As you move through this report, I invite you to see not just numbers or programs, but the collective impact of many hands, hearts, and Nations working together. Wopida for walking alongside us.

If this report moves you, we invite you to consider a flexible, unrestricted gift, to join our community of sustaining donors, or to explore a multi-year commitment that helps ensure Indigenous-led cancer prevention and survivorship efforts reach more Native people, in more places, when they are needed most.

We look forward to continuing this work in a good way grounded in culture, guided by community, and committed to health equity for all Native people.

In gratitude,

*Melissa Buffalo*

Melissa Buffalo, MS (Meskwaki and Dakota)  
Chief Executive Officer, American Indian Cancer Foundation



# OUR STORY, OUR IMPACT



## MISSION

The American Indian Cancer Foundation (AICAF) works to eliminate the cancer burdens of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people through improved access to prevention, early detection, treatment, and survivor support.

## VISION

Through hard work, culturally appropriate community-based programs and policy change that affords Native people access to the best prevention and treatment strategies, we see a day where American Indian communities are free of the burdens of cancer.



We believe Native communities have the wisdom to find the solutions to cancer inequities, but are often seeking the organizational capacity, expert input, and resources to do so.



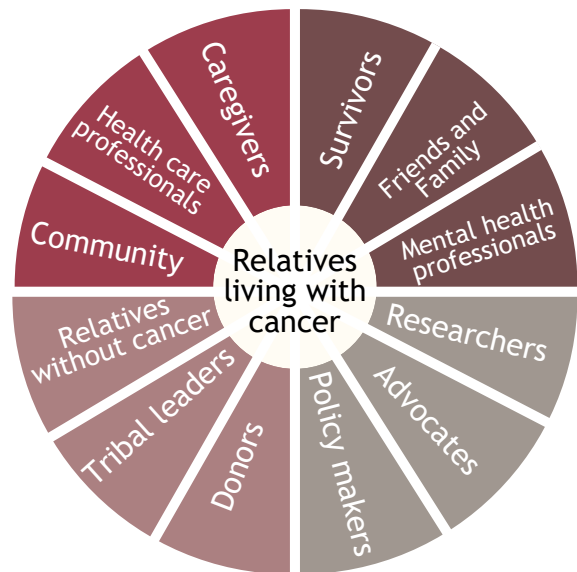
We support innovative, community-based interventions that engage Native populations in the discovery of their own cancer best practices.



We strive to be a partner trusted by Tribal and urban community members, leaders, health care providers, and others working toward effective and sustainable cancer solutions.

## WHO WE SERVE

We are committed to providing our communities with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need to help their relatives make informed decisions about cancer prevention and care. By educating and empowering these individuals, we can collectively work towards a cancer-free future for our people and future generations.



Our circle of support represents individuals united in support of cancer survivors. From caregivers to health care professionals, advocates to Tribal leaders, and beyond. Together, we stand as a community committed to providing support, guidance, and empowerment to our relatives with cancer.



“We lift up the knowledge, the wisdom, and the strength of our communities because it’s what we have always done and makes sense to us. There has been so much that has happened over the generations. I think having compassion and empathy for people is so critical to the work that we do. There’s so much behind each individual person. And I think about that in the work that I do in collecting data and information. Oftentimes in research, when you ask a question, it’s a data point. And to me, I see every single data point or every question that we ask, every response we get, has a story behind it, just like me and the work I do. So we need to better understand the stories behind our data and our relatives it represents. All of this is part of our efforts to heal with culture.”

*Wyatt Pickner  
Program Director, AICAF  
Húŋkpati Dakota*

## OUR PROGRAMS



Prevention & Policy seeks to engage, educate, and empower AI/AN communities in implementing healthy lifestyle practices that help reduce cancer burdens. We support these practices through Tribal resolutions and policies. We utilize culturally appropriate resources to engage community members and stakeholders to create Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) change in communities, and we also offer training and technical assistance to AI/AN communities and organizations.



AICAF's Research Program works with communities to identify culturally relevant research questions, methods, and funding opportunities that align with community needs and priorities. Our team supports the collection and use of population-specific data, aiming to find culturally aligned health solutions that are both effective and resonate within our unique communities. We prioritize appropriate dissemination of results, so all our communities have access to the information that is most relevant and useful to their efforts to improve their health and wellbeing.

The Evaluation Program supports the work of all AICAF teams and programs, providing insight into the impact of our efforts and identifying opportunities to better serve Tribal communities. We use Indigenous and Western evaluation frameworks to establish and monitor program outputs, outcomes, benchmarks, and success stories. Our team accomplishes this through the use of logic models, evaluation plans, and reports that are shared with our communities.



AICAF's Cancer Equity Program aims to reduce the cancer burdens on Native people by increasing cancer screening and early detection rates across Indian Country. Program staff focuses their efforts on raising awareness of many common cancers faced by Native people through cancer awareness campaigns that promote screening, culturally tailored resources, cancer coalition, training, and media tools, community education and outreach activities, and collaboration with clinics to help build capacity and improve tribal health systems.

While our mission is to eliminate all types of illness in our communities, AICAF prioritizes the cancers that are most prevalent among AI/AN people. The team centers most projects around these topics: breast, cervical, colorectal, lung, and oral cancers, and human papillomavirus (HPV) immunization.



Tobacco work is embedded into all of AICAF's programs and projects. AICAF's work is guided by our cultures and teachings, which include our sacred traditional tobacco. We acknowledge and honor that traditional tobacco is a gift from Creator, and many communities use it in a traditional way.

Mainstream evidence-based commercial tobacco control interventions often do not produce the same results for Indigenous people. Comprehensive strategies rooted in knowledge of customs, cultural traditions, and ways of knowing are proving to be promising practices for elevating the health of American Indian people. AICAF works with advocates across Indian Country to restore traditional tobacco practices, to reduce commercial tobacco abuse like cigarette smoking, and to prevent secondhand smoke exposure.

## OUR IMPACT

Through unrestricted funding, we not only empower Tribal and Urban Indian Clinics to implement innovative cancer solutions but also sustain vital services like our Virtual Cancer Support Circle. This inclusive platform provides a safe and culturally affirming space for individuals affected by cancer to connect, share experiences, and access support from anywhere. Your generosity enables us to bridge gaps in care, foster community resilience, and uplift Indigenous voices in the fight against cancer. Together, we're not just providing services; we're nurturing healing, solidarity, and empowerment within our communities.

- In 2024 & 2025, AICAF has engaged 126 partners in coalition work to address cancer prevention, screening, and survivorship.
- Mini-grants were provided to 70 clinic champions during various campaign months.
- Through the supported activities of our clinic champions, more than 28,691 people were reached, 2,188 cancer screenings were completed, more than 30 different resources were created, and 9,109 resources distributed.
- Throughout AICAF's Turquoise Thursday, Blue Beads, and Indigenous Pink awareness months, nearly 350 pledges were received, and 571 people attended our webinars.
- AICAF staff was also present at 305 events, including having the opportunity to give 28 different presentations.



## Building Sustainable Impact in Indian Country

The American Indian Cancer Foundation continues to serve Native communities nationwide with a small but deeply committed team working to address some of the most significant cancer disparities in the United States. While our staff size remains modest, the burden facing Indigenous communities is immense, requiring culturally grounded education, prevention, survivorship support, research partnerships, and systems change across many regions and Tribal Nations.

Over the past two years, much of our work has been made possible through grant-funded programs and partnerships. These investments have allowed us to expand community engagement, support Indigenous leadership in cancer prevention and care, elevate Native voices in research, and develop programs rooted in culture, relationship, and trust.

At the same time, reliance on restricted grant funding creates ongoing challenges for long-term sustainability and organizational growth. Many grants are designed to support specific projects, but do not fully fund the operational infrastructure needed to sustain and grow Indigenous-led work including staffing, leadership development, communications, technology, evaluation, and rapid response to emerging community needs.

Despite these limitations, our team continues to deliver meaningful impact through collaboration, innovation, and a deep commitment to community accountability.

As we look ahead, AICAF is intentionally working to strengthen unrestricted and diversified funding streams. Increasing flexible support will allow us to:

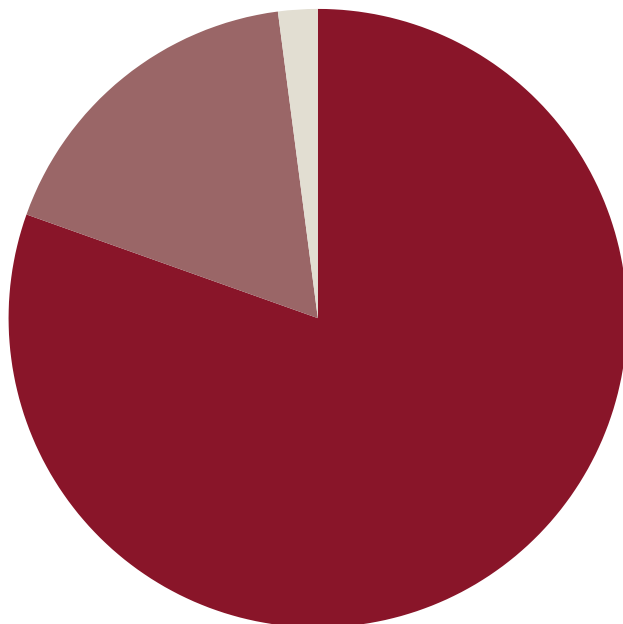
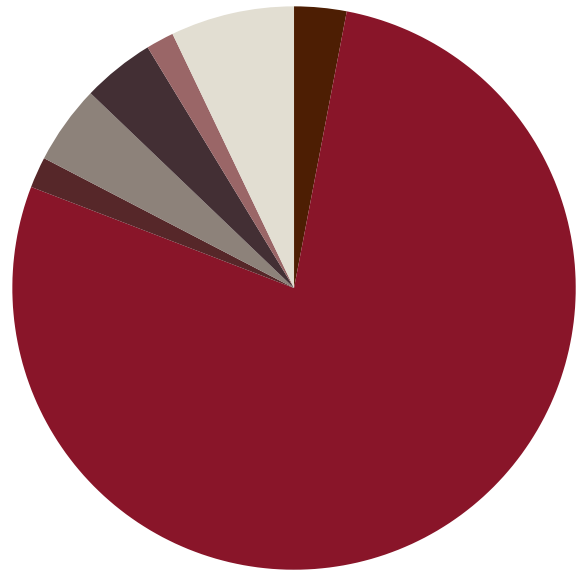
- Sustain and retain Indigenous staff and leadership
- Respond more quickly to community priorities
- Invest in organizational infrastructure and wellness
- Expand culturally grounded cancer prevention and survivorship initiatives
- Build long-term stability for future generations

Our vision is not only to grow programs, but to strengthen an enduring Indigenous-led institution capable of meeting the evolving needs of Native communities for years to come.

# 2024 FINANCIALS

## Support and Revenue

■ Contracts	\$1,946,683
■ Grants	\$75,000
■ Individual Donations	\$44,562
■ Corporate & Organization Donations	\$113,279
■ Powwow for Hope	\$103,753
■ Polar Plunge	\$40,000
■ Other Income	\$177,529
<b>Total Support and Revenue</b>	<b>\$2,500,806</b>



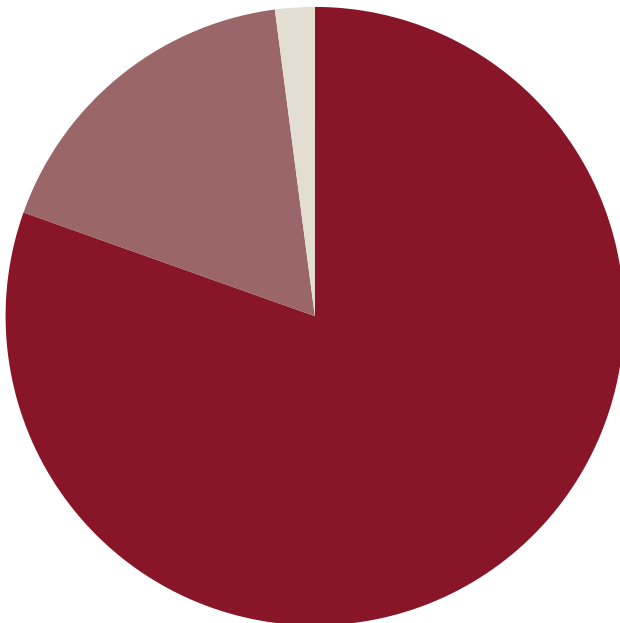
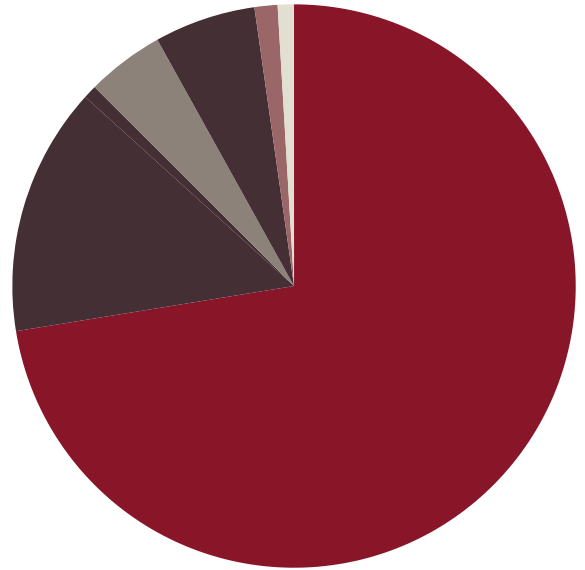
## Expenses

■ Program Services	\$2,479,912
■ Management & General	\$596,207
■ Fundraising	\$46,071
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$3,122,190</b>

# 2025 FINANCIALS

## Support and Revenue

■ Contracts	\$2,198,513
■ Grants	\$433,251
■ Individual Donations	\$23,372
■ Corporate & Organization Donations	\$135,298
■ Conference	\$176,392
■ Polar Plunge	\$40,000
■ Other Income	\$28,273
<b>Total Support and Revenue</b>	<b>\$3,035,548</b>



## Expenses

■ Program Services	\$2,706,900
■ Management & General	\$541,233
■ Fundraising	\$46,071
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$3,294,204</b>

*Unaudited*

# POWWOW FOR HOPE

In 2024, we were honored to welcome survivors, caregivers, dancers, drums, and community from around the nation to the 13th Powwow for Hope: Dancing for Life, Love & Hope.

Powwow For Hope serves to support our communities by providing awareness and educational health resources, strengthening our mission to provide relevant tools to increase positive health outcomes. Local organizations and sponsors joined us in this opportunity as we came together with our relatives to honor survivors, those on their cancer journey, and the loved ones we have lost.

Women hold a sacred place in many AI/AN communities. Understanding that breast cancer is a leading cause of cancer death amongst Native women, AICAF has historically elevated breast cancer awareness during Powwow for Hope by dedicating space to honor the lives of those affected by the disease.

This event is a space to raise not only awareness of the cancer burdens American Indian communities experience but also to raise dollars that support the important work the American Indian Cancer Foundation does to encourage prevention, provide cancer resources to Native communities, and change the future of healthcare in Indian Country.

The Powwow for Hope silent auction and community teams event provides organizations, families, and individuals an opportunity to participate in supporting the mission of AICAF through fundraising. Culturally relevant prevention resources, connection to healing, and supportive services for survivors, caregivers, and their families benefit and grow from the monetary support of donors and funders. Every year, we are encouraged by the significant turnout and participation of community for these events. Our core values of taking care of each other, sharing, and teaching resonate in these acts of giving.

We are honored to announce that with the help of our dedicated sponsors, contributors, and donors, we reached our goal of raising over \$100,000 at the 2024 Powwow for Hope.





In 2025, we also paused to honor the lives of two individuals whose presence deeply shaped the work and spirit of the American Indian Cancer Foundation.

We remember Chris Johnson, (Waka hdi Ptecana), a former AICAF employee whose contributions, dedication, and care helped strengthen our mission and the communities we serve.

We also honor Randy Gresczyk, (Ozaawaagwaneyaash), who was a cherished part of our Powwow for Hope gatherings, who generously shared his knowledge, traditions, and spirit with all who knew him.

Both Chris and Randy brought compassion, wisdom, and heart to this work. Their impact continues to live on through the relationships they built, the lives they touched, and the community.



Randy



Chris





# Inaugural Native Cancer Conference

*“Seeing all the stories that have been shared on stage and the healing that comes from traditional methods as well as the technological advances...everyone has been so warm and welcoming. This has been a great experience.”*

Brent Barbre, Tunica Biloxi Indian Tribe of Louisiana  
2025 Native Cancer Conference Attendee

In November 2025, the American Indian Cancer Foundation hosted its inaugural Native Cancer Conference, bringing together nearly 180 Indigenous leaders, healthcare providers, researchers, survivors, and advocates from across Indian Country.

As our inaugural conference, this gathering was an opportunity to connect communities, healthcare workers, survivors, advocates, patients, and more as we continue to share stories, resources, discussions, grief and joy with others who are in this fight against cancer in Indian Country with us.

Coming together in this space allowed us to address these challenges we’re facing as Native people in a healthcare system that was not designed to prioritize us, and create an environment of support as we work towards solutions to change the future of healthcare for our future generations. The event generated significant engagement and financial support to advance AICAF’s work, reinforcing AICAF’s role as a national leader in advancing cancer equity and established a foundation for ongoing conferences and coalition-building.





# Community Champion Spotlight

Rooted in community, AICAF is immensely grateful for the relationships we share with relatives nationwide. Many members of our communities from all over contribute to the work that we do, and our ability to continue doing it. We acknowledge some of these amazing groups who stood with us in 2024 & 2025.

- ◆ The Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana hosted their Inaugural Healing Tribal Strong 5k Rez Run in September of 2024. The event was dedicated to generating awareness and support for individuals supporting a loved one with cancer, those journeying through cancer, and in honor of those lost to the disease. This raised a generous \$10,000 donation to AICAF in October of 2024.
- ◆ The MHA Nation Annual Ice Warrior Polar Plunge, hosted by former AICAF Board member and MHA Nation Chairman Mark Fox, is an annual fundraiser supporting the fight against cancer inequities. The event contributed \$40,000 to AICAF at both the 9th annual in 2024 and 10<sup>th</sup> annual in 2025.
- ◆ The Seminole Tribal Nation hosted two events in 2025 that AICAF had the honor of being a part of. First, the Diamonds and Denim Gala in August, hosted at their Hard Rock Casino Hotel, which honored multiple charities and the work that they are doing. AICAF was presented with a check for \$5,000 at this event.

Later, in October AICAF was selected as their receiving nonprofit of their 26<sup>th</sup> Annual PINKTOBER® Campaign to Support of Breast Cancer Research. Breast Cancer themed enamel pins were sold at multiple Hard Rock Casino venues, as well as online. AICAF was presented with a donation of \$25,858 from the proceeds of this campaign.

# AICAF Annual Campaigns

## January - Turquoise Thursday

Cervical Cancer Awareness Month celebration, also known as Turquoise Thursday Month. Serves to raise awareness about cervical cancer prevention and screening within Indian Country.



## February - Cancer Prevention Month

Serves to honor National Cancer Prevention Month and celebrate the power of Native cultures in addressing cancer prevention. February also serves as Black History Month, when we commemorate the achievements and continuous contributions of our African American relatives to society. As we proudly acknowledge the power of culture in prevention, we show our appreciation to all who have fought with us in the battle against cancer.

## March - Blue Beads

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people face the highest colorectal cancer (CRC) rates in the U.S., with Alaska Native people experiencing the highest rates globally. In response, the American Indian Cancer Foundation (AICAF) launched its Blue Beads campaign to raise awareness, promote early detection, and provide culturally grounded education and outreach to Indigenous communities.



# AICAF Annual Campaigns

## May - Keep Tobacco Sacred Day

Hosted by the American Indian Cancer Foundation in observance of World No Tobacco Day. Tobacco has always held a sacred place in many Indigenous cultures, as a medicine, as prayer, and a connection to our ancestors. Our world will never be tobacco-free, and it shouldn't be. But what was once sacred has been distorted. Commercial tobacco created, marketed, and profited from and has caused deep harm in our communities, contributing to addiction, disease, and ongoing health disparities. Keep Tobacco Sacred Day is about reclaiming what was never meant to be lost.

## June - Celebrate Indigenous Life

The Celebrate Indigenous Life campaign aimed to honor the strength, resilience, and stories of Indigenous cancer survivors during National Cancer Survivors Month. Through this campaign, the American Indian Cancer Foundation plans to uplift survivor voices, raise awareness about the impact of cancer in Native communities, and celebrate the ongoing journeys of healing and hope.

## August - Indigenous Milk Is Medicine

Indigenous Mother's Milk Is Medicine highlights the powerful connection between breastfeeding and breast cancer risk reduction, beginning in August and continuing into Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October. Breastfeeding is a traditional practice that protects the health of mother and baby. It lowers the risk of breast and ovarian cancers, making it a vital prevention tool for Indigenous communities. AICAF is committed to sharing culturally grounded education and prevention resources to reduce breast cancer in Native populations.



# AICAF Annual Campaigns

## October - Indigenous Pink Breast Cancer Awareness Month

The Indigenous Pink campaign is a national effort to raise breast cancer awareness in Native communities. Since its inception, Indigenous Pink has promoted early detection, regular screenings, and culturally relevant education for all bodies—including women, men, non-binary, and genderfluid relatives.



## November - Sacred Breath Lung Cancer Awareness Month

Each November, during National Lung Cancer Awareness Month, AICAF leads the Sacred Breath campaign to raise awareness about lung cancer and promote lung health across Native communities. Now in its sixth year, Sacred Breath addresses the alarming disparities in lung cancer rates and promotes the importance of keeping traditional tobacco sacred, while supporting Native cancer caregivers and families. The campaign honors cultural traditions while advocating for healthier futures through prevention, education, and community action.



# BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Comprised of Native leaders from diverse backgrounds and regions across the nation, our board members embody a rich tapestry of experience, expertise, and commitment to our mission.

Each member of our board brings forth an impressive set of skills, energy, passion, and invaluable connections, all dedicated to advancing the goals of AICAF.

As we navigate the complex landscape of community empowerment, cultural preservation, and policy, the collective wisdom and leadership of our board serve as guiding beacons, steering us toward meaningful impact and positive change.

- Chairperson (2024-2025), Vice Chairperson (2024) – Tamera Begay, Navajo
- Chairperson (2024) – Nicole Hallingstad, Tlingit
- Vice Chairperson (2024-2025), Board Director (2024) – Christian Weaver, Shinnecock
  
- Treasurer (2025) – Elizabeth Carr, Sault Sainte Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
- Secretary (2024-2025) – Donna Palakiko, Native Hawaiian
- Interim Treasurer (2025), Board Director (2024-2025) – Lillian Sparks Robinson, Rosebud Sioux
- Treasurer (2024) – Frances Tiger, Muscogee Creek Nation
  
- Board Director (2024-2025) – Zepporah Fuller, Diné
- Board Director (2025) – Jamie Gomez, Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Tribes of Alaska
- Board Director (2025) – Elise McGowan-Cuellar, Waganakising Odawa
- Board Director (2025) – Alicia Mitchell, Cherokee Nation
- Board Director (2024-2025) – Johnny Nelson, Navajo

# Staff

- Chief Executive Officer – Melissa Buffalo, MS, Meskwaki & Dakota
- Deputy Director – CoCo Villaluz, BA, Hidatsa, Assiniboine & Chamorro
  
- Research Assistant – Madison Anderson, MPH, Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe
- Communications Project Manager – Brittany Bentley, BA, Waganakising Odawa
- Cancer Programs Specialist – Karri Bigboy, BA, Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Office Administrator – Samantha Blackhall, AS
- Epidemiologist – Emily Bobyock, MPH
- Cancer Programs Specialist – LaToya Brave Heart, MPH, Oglala Lakota
- Cancer Programs Project Manager – Jenna Calder, MS, Chippewa
- Nurse Project Manager – Jessica Deaton, MHA
- Research Project Manager – Taryn Evans, BA, BS, Muscogee Nation (Mvskoke) descendant
- Nurse Project Manager – Tina Gerovac-Lavasseur, DNP, RN
- Prevention & Policy Specialist – Eric Gipson, MPH
- Evaluation Specialist – Faith Gronda, BA, Wyandot of Anderdon Nation
- Research Coordinator – Mac Hickey, BA, Ojibwe/Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Health Equity Program Coordinator – Mahlea Hunt, BA, Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina
- Communications Project Manager – Shoshanna Johnson, BA, Absentee Shawnee
- Research Specialist – Amika Kamath, BA
- Executive Assistant, Project Coordinator, and Event Lead – Veronica Laverdure, BA, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa
- Finance Manager – Holly Liptack, BS
- Research Project Manager – Evie Odden, BA, Sisseton Wahpeton and Mdewakanton Dakota lineal descendant
- Program Director – Lindsey Petras, MSN
- Program Director – Wyatt Pickner, MPH, Hunkpati Dakota
- Director of Operations – Jen Rico, MA
- Cancer Programs Specialist – Misse Chapman Skinner, MLS, Húŋkpařha (Standing Rock) and Isáŋyathi (Santee) Nations
- Finance Manager – Marie Smith, BA
- Prevention & Policy Specialist – Nora Vonnegut, MPP, MPH
- Cancer Programs Project Manager – Jennifer Williams, BA, Caddo Nation



## **Granters**

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Essentia Health  
Exact Sciences  
Fond Du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa  
Minnesota Department of Health  
Prairie Island Indian Community  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
University of Minnesota  
White Earth Nation

## **Sponsors**

American Cancer Society - Cancer Action Network MN  
AmeriHealth Administrators  
AstraZeneca  
Blue Cross Blue Shield MN  
BlueLink TPA  
Cellular One  
Dana-Farber Cancer Institute  
Delta Dental of Minnesota  
Eisai Inc.  
Exact Sciences  
Foundation Medicine  
Genentech  
Hennepin Healthcare Comprehensive Cancer Center  
Mayo  
Minnesota Department of Health  
Merck  
Minneapolis Foundation  
Minnesota Oncology  
Molina Healthcare  
National Marrow Donor Program  
Pfizer  
Poarch Band of Creek Indians





## Sponsors Cont.

- Prairie Island Indian Community
- Sanford Health
- Sears Imported Autos
- Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community
- Triple Moon, LLC
- UCare
- UMN Medical School - Center of American Indian and Minority Health
- University of Minnesota - Masonic Cancer Center
- Wisconsin DHS - Cancer Control and Prevention

## Donors

- Astra Zeneca
- Blake and Ryan Reynolds Fund
- Erasca Foundation
- Hard Rock Foundation
- Headwaters Foundation
- The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation
- Native Voices Rising
- Seminole Tribe of Florida
- Mystic Lake Casino Hotel
- Tunica Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana



**American Indian  
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