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By GRACE BAEK / CBS NEWS / May 8, 2020, 8:07 PM

# Navajo Nation residents face coronavirus without running water

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Margie Barton unfolded a map of Dilkon in Navajo Nation and pointed to the clusters of households representing 90% of its residents living without running water. Barton is the coordinator of the Dilkon Chapter House, the local administrative and communal center, and is involved in almost all aspects of keeping services up and running for the community — including access to clean water.

About 30% of the population in the Navajo Nation does not have running water in their homes during a time when hand-washing is critical. It also has one of the highest [COVID-19 infection rates](#) per capita in the U.S., after New York and New Jersey.

"Once it was brought to our attention just how many people were catching and dying from it — that's when it hit home here in Dilkon. All of a sudden, everybody is scared," said Barton.

In response, the Navajo Nation quickly instated the country's most extensive [lockdown orders](#), but inadequate infrastructure and lack of access to basic needs is intensifying the crisis. Homes without running water may only have a 50-gallon tank to siphon water out of, requiring careful use at a time when families can't afford to ration water.



A water tank in the backyard of an elderly Navajo woman whose home lacks running water. / CBS NEWS

"We're at the most southwestern portion of the Navajo Nation, and our needs are dire. We feel like we're forgotten at times," Barton said.

Dilkon is located 85 miles east of Flagstaff, Arizona, and spans almost 17 square miles. Those without running water spend hours hauling barrels of water, often on unpaved roads, forced to break social distancing guidelines to meet their daily water needs. It can also be very costly.

[Navajo Tribal Utility Authority \(NTUA\)](#) is the largest tribal multi-utility provider in the U.S. It operates 11 external watering stations for residents to haul water, charging \$5 for up to 1,000 gallons. But for those who have to purchase water elsewhere or rely on bottled water, it can cost \$1.50 a gallon. A study looking at water issues in Navajo Nation, funded in part by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, found Navajo households without running water paid [71 times the amount](#) that water users in typical urban areas paid.

Dilkon has two water trucks that haul weekly water supplies to elderly tribal members and families with health and transportation issues. Both vehicles were temporarily out of commission awaiting parts for expensive repairs — something Barton has to manage frequently due to road conditions and unpaved tough terrain.

"They'll have them repaired by next week, then we can start hauling water for the community again," Barton explained. She said 30 families are dependent on the trucks for water. "If the trucks are not running, we ask community members and neighbors to help them. We'll also take boxes of water out to them.

George McGraw is the founder of [DigDeep](#), a nonprofit focused on water access issues. He said the Navajo Nation isn't alone: Over 2 million Americans across all 50 states don't have any running water or a flush toilet at home, but Native Americans have trouble accessing water more than any other group.

The United States built one of the world's most successful water and sanitation systems, with the New Deal expanding the development to include rural areas in the 1930s. Still, McGraw said that system was never designed to serve everybody. "If you were poor or a community of color, you were deliberately sidelined out of the infrastructural development built to serve the rest of the country."

A study by DigDeep and US Water Alliance, "[Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States](#)," identified race as the strongest predictor of access to running water as an American in 2020. It found African American and Latinx households were nearly twice as likely to lack complete plumbing compared to white families, while [Native American](#) households were 19 times more likely. The study found race was a more significant factor than income and geography.

For tribal communities like the Navajo Nation, a decline in funding has made it hard to catch up to the rest of the country. In 2016, Indian Health Services estimated it would need [\\$2.7 billion](#) to provide water and sanitation infrastructure to all homes on reservations that can be reached by traditional lines, yet Congress appropriated less than 4% of the needed amount.



Navajo Nation stretches across portions of three states in the desert Southwest. / CBS NEWS

The Navajo, along with many other tribes, signed treaties with the federal government over 150 years ago giving up much of their land. In return, they were promised funding to support education, housing, health care and infrastructure. But decades of underfunding and bureaucratic obstacles left many tribal communities frustrated and without basics like running water.

Despite insufficient federal funds and extraordinary geographic obstacles, NTUA manages to bring piped water and electricity to almost 70% of all homes in the Navajo Nation. McGraw described the NTUA as heroes. "They maintain water infrastructure that in any other part of the country would just be impossible."

The NTUA has 37,000 electricity and 21,151 water ratepayers across an area the size of West Virginia, most of them residential. "In comparison, Los Angeles has millions of ratepayers, and most are industrial with a higher rate, yet the city is barely able to make ends meet," McGraw noted. Still, there are places in Navajo Nation that may have to wait decades for water infrastructure — and some communities it may never reach.



CBSN Originals' Adam Yamaguchi examines a water pump in Navajo Nation. / CBS NEWS

DigDeep started the [Navajo Water Project](#) to help fill that water access gap. Since 2014, they've built over 300 water systems in areas without infrastructure and diminishing clean water supplies. Groundwater in Navajo Nation is often contaminated in areas surrounding some 521 abandoned uranium mines.

"Our clients wake up every morning and the first thing they think of is, 'Where am I going to get enough water today to survive?' It's a daily reality that revolves around your access to water and a reality that most Americans cannot comprehend," said McGraw.

Margie Barton enlisted the help of other Dilkon Chapter staff and spent a year and half surveying every household in Dilkon. McGraw recalled, "We got a call from Margie, and she said, 'I know water is not coming anytime soon, so we want to do what you're doing.' Then she sent us boxes and boxes of survey data." They found most of the community members were using barrels to store and use water at home.

Dilkon Chapter House and DigDeep have secured enough funding to purchase the first 80 water systems that would use 1,200-gallon cistern tanks and water pumps to get running water into homes off the grid. Clean water still needs to be hauled to the homes, but with careful planning, the water could last families a month. Ten of these systems were installed before the pandemic hit.

"We're trying to sustain our community," said Barton. "It's important to be strong. It's essential for living out here."

COVID-19 has brought historical inequalities into sharp focus and made addressing these issues more urgent than ever. McGraw said, "When it comes to COVID-19, all we have is prevention. We have no treatment, no vaccine. You can do two things — wash your hands frequently and you can isolate yourself from other people. Neither is possible if you don't have running water at home."

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