

Spotlight on Perseverance During the Pandemic

This month we spoke with four tribal leaders about how the COVID-19 health crisis has impacted their respective tribes; what their strategy has been to combat the crisis; how the public reaction has been; and words of advice from their experiences to share with other tribes. Here is what they had to say...

Temet A. Aguilar, Tribal Chairman Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians

Casino Pauma in Pauma Valley, CA
casinopauma.com
paumatribes.com



Temet A. Aguilar

COVID-19 has impacted us financially, socially, physically, and emotionally. We have had the challenge of paying bills and taking care of our tribal members as well as employees, when no revenue was coming in due to business closures. However, our financial diligence has allowed us to retain employees and sustain our most vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, we have seen

increased alcohol and substance abuse during this pandemic, as well as a rise in depression, anxiety and other mental illness. In a way, this pandemic has exposed the good and bad of our communities.

The strategy to combat this crisis is simple: health, welfare, and safety. With health as our primary focus, our responsibility is to the whole community, therefore we have provided food, health and safety supplies to all community members and employees, general welfare tax-exempt assistance to all tribal members, and opened a public supply store with goods tax-free and at cost. We are providing safe work environments, virtual meetings, updated communication networks, wearing face masks and social distancing. We have also resumed our forestry, roads, farming, and agricultural work following CDC guidelines.

A stringent property plan was implemented following CDC and government official guidelines with precautionary measures taken, including but not limited to: required face mask and temperature screenings; gaming floor reconfigurations with plexiglass shields for social distancing between machines, at the cash cage, players club and food/beverage stations; hand sanitation and wipe stations; hospital grade microbial filters; and constant deep cleaning procedures using CDC approved disinfectant. We have received an overwhelmingly positive response from customers, positive compliance with new guidelines and customers commenting they feel safe at our casino

due to all of the safety measures and practices put in place.

With the full effects of this pandemic unknown and no vaccine available yet, it is important as tribal leaders to provide clear guidance and communication to everyone we lead. In these unprecedented times, we must never forget our way of life, that which sustains us. As sovereign nations, we have led our tribes since time immemorial and if we continue to follow our traditional ways, we will not only survive this pandemic, but thrive. It is essential that we retain a strong spiritual base as our minds, bodies and spirits have been negatively affected with rising societal issues nationwide. Therefore, we must treat this pandemic seriously and think about all of the people that depend on us – tribal members and the millions of non-Indians that visit, work, and live with us. We owe it to them to do what is best for, not only ourselves, but for those around us.

Michael Hunter, Tribal Chairman Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians

Coyote Valley Casino in Redwood Valley, CA
coyotevalleycasino.com



Michael Hunter

COVID-19 has had a reverberating effect on our tribe and community as a whole. The pandemic has changed the predictability of the workforce, supplies and resources. Operating hours and standard operating procedures have changed to keep our team members and community safe.

The virus is of particular threat to Coyote Valley due to the socio-economic and health risk demographics. The 70-acre reservation is home to 250 residents, including 11 elders over the age of 65. An additional 250 members reside off the reservation – some in high risk, urban areas.

Per the most recent tribal census data, 24% of the residents are “doubled up,” in overcrowded homes, 97% are low-moderate income, and many rely on general assistance from the tribe. During the initial closure, we had our struggles with closing the reservation to visitors to help protect our members. It was important for us to have the capability of isolating

and quarantining households, and ensuring our community members received current/updated information on the pandemic – including instructions and supplies to sanitize and clean their homes effectively.

Our Public Health Director and management team have done a wonderful job staying informed with surrounding counties, and paying attention to the trends throughout the U.S. and the world. At the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the state had very little access to tests, which could have had a devastating impact within the Native community as we have seen happen on the Navajo Nation.

Per the direction of our Public Health Director, the tribe started to monitor the residential sewer system for COVID-19. This technique allowed our Health Director to monitor potential uprisings within the community; further allowing the tribal government to respond accordingly.

As Tribal Chairman, I felt it was extremely important to combat the crisis by gathering all available information, listening to experts (local and worldwide) and disseminate facts to my community.

This strategy was and is an on-going collaborative effort among our key players. As the pandemic evolves, so do our operations. Our teams are continually assessing the situational impacts to our tribal businesses, tribal members and tribal employees. When new situations are presented, our teams immediately update the standard operating procedures and the detailed COVID-19 Pandemic plan accordingly.

Our casino was built with a 100% non-recycled, fresh air HVAC system. In addition to this fresh air component, we have implemented a number of important procedures to enhance team member and guests safety. We require all guests and employees to wash/sanitize their hands upon entry and re-entry; utilize non-touch thermo device monitors for potential fevers; and masks must be worn at all times – covering both nose and face. We employ increased sanitizing, with team members actively sanitizing and wiping down machines and the facility during operational hours; and nightly through cleaning conducted during the closing hours of 4am-9am.

We have mandatory staff COVID-19 testing every month for all team members (both saliva based and nose/throat testing methods) with a private company to ensure a quick turnaround time and notification. Additionally, we have eliminated indoor-smoking and require all guests to utilize the designated outdoor smoking area. Team members are encouraged to notify HR and their supervisors if they are not feeling well. Our management team would rather error on the side of extra caution, rather than having a COVID outbreak among team members and our guests.

My advice to other tribes is to continue to communicate and collaborate. This is key to a healthy tribal community, and the Coyote Valley Tribe has worked diligently with all departments, local experts to expand the delivery of health and social services to our community. Do not be afraid to adjust on the fly and/or make changes as the pandemic evolves.

Lloyd Mathiesen, Tribal Chairman Chicken Ranch Rancheria of Me-Wuk Indians of California

Chicken Ranch Casino in Jamestown, CA

chickenranchcasino.com

chickenranchtribe.com



Lloyd Mathiesen

We have a very small reservation, which only two members are able to live on. Because of that, our tribal members are spread out all through the community. This crisis has impacted us similarly to how it has impacted everyone in the U.S. Nobody in the tribe has gotten COVID-19, so we've been fortunate about that, at least for now. We have had a couple of employees get it from outside

work, but with the guidelines we have in place, it hasn't spread in our place of business.

Initially, we closed down our casino for two and a half months, and after we reopened, we moved forward with tough restrictions. Prior to COVID-19, our legal occupancy was just under 800, and since we've reopened, we are only allowing 425 people in the casino at a time. To make sure there is more than enough space, only three people are allowed per table, and then we have every other machine keyed off unless there is plexiglass in between them.

Social distancing is such a big part of it – everyone has to wear a mask and we have absolutely no smoking inside. When guests walk in, they are screened with face scanners to check their temperatures. We also have sanitizing stations and many other cleaning protocols in place.

The public reaction has been great. They feel we are going above and beyond to make this as safe a place as possible. As far as business, it's been absolutely crazy for us. We did not expect this at all – our numbers have been great. We are one of the fortunate ones, because I know other casino properties are either doing really well or not well at all. We feel very fortunate.

Our tribe has a health clinic, so if anyone is feeling ill, they get tested. We've been working with the federal government for resources and are now able to get testing right away, with results back quickly. Our clinic is in town two miles from the casino and has benefited the greater community as well.

We listen to what our community wants. They wanted to be able to game again, but in the safest possible environment. Our members also wanted to be able to get out there and also let our employees get back to work. We have 280 employees in addition to our own people and their families. We implemented full blown restrictions and said, 'we're going to have fun, but we're going to do everything that we possibly can with safety, and here are the rules.' Now, we're trying to get back to somewhat of a normal life.

**Terry Rambler, Chairman
San Carlos Apache Tribe**

Apache Gold Casino Resort in San Carlos, AZ
and Apache Sky Casino in Winkelman, AZ

apache-gold-casino.com

apacheskycasino.com

sancarlosapache.com



Terry Rambler

Our Council declared a state of emergency back in March and had zero COVID-19 positive cases on our reservation until May 27, largely because of strict mitigation measures. Since then, we have seen two surges and a recent softening in numbers.

We have completed about 10,717 tests of residents and employees, and have recorded 1,629 positives with 1,459 recoveries. We reached a high of 237

cases in one day. COVID-19 patients represent an 18% admission rate. Since May 27, San Carlos Apache Healthcare has admitted 195 patients with COVID-19, of which 100 were transferred to other hospitals. So far, we have lost 17 members of the tribe who lived on the reservation, and another five off-reservation.

The impacts on our members are wide ranging. There are those among our members who suffer from the disease itself and also those that suffered the loss of family members who succumbed to the virus. There has been an increase in anxiety and depression. Never could we have imagined the need for wearing face masks and keeping our distance. Living under the fear of infection has taken a toll on us, and so has staying at home and living in isolation. Some of our off-reservation neighbors who do not take mitigation as seriously regard our members with fear or derision when they see us wearing masks.

Economically, the virus has left many without jobs. The tribe's revenues have substantially decreased, especially with the closure of our gaming, restaurants and resort operations, but every sector of our economy has slowed substantially. While we were able to garner substantial federal funds through the CARES Act and the extra unemployment benefit helped some members, those funds have run out. Without a major stimulus package from Congress, Indian Country and all of America will be facing a very bleak economic horizon.

In April, we closed our borders to non-residents; closed our casinos and resort; restricted travel to two days a week for essential supplies; mandated mask wearing and CDC guidelines compliance; limited crowd size to 10; put all employees on administrative leave; instituted a curfew; and prohibited sports and recreation activities. Some of these restrictions were recently eased.

In order to handle a surge of cases, the tribe designated the

Apache Gold Hotel as an alternative care site (ACS) to isolate all asymptomatic COVID-19 positives, and quarantine their direct close contacts. Our ACS is one of two in Indian Country. This effort is perhaps the greatest reason we have kept our infection rate low. At present, there are about 800 members who have been either isolated or quarantined at the ACS with an average length of stay of 10 days. However, while the ACS did well to isolate and quarantine, the Apache Gold Hotel lost its customer base, which will require major renovations and marketing to overcome.

Apache Sky and Apache Gold have reopened, but at only 50% capacity. All patrons and employees are required to wear masks. The San Carlos Apache Gaming Enterprise developed a detailed plan instituting industry best practices, and invested over \$500,000 in personal protective equipment, infrared temperature screening, sanitizing stations, MERV-13 filters and ultraviolet C to eliminate bacteria and virus from the HVAC system, as well as Plexiglas between all slot machines and table game positions.

There are team members stationed throughout the casinos to ensure that, when a machine is not in play, it is immediately cleaned and sanitized. The casinos close for several hours during the weekdays to deep clean. And, there is no alcohol service, and the bars and restaurants are closed. All food is served as "grab and go."

The gaming enterprise has also implemented a mandatory testing requirement for all employees, made available a crisis hotline, a newsletter for employees to keep them informed, as well as Teladoc and an employee assistance program including telephone or in-person counseling.

Notwithstanding all of these mitigation efforts, it will take years for our casino and resort to restore its market and brand. Hopefully, together with our financial partners and the federal government, we can build back better!

This virus knows no boundaries – not age, class, education, borders nor ethnicity. The entire world has been affected. Unfortunately, as in 1918, the virus has become politicized and, as a result, the federal government did not have an effective national mitigation plan. We have experienced job losses, shortages of food and basic supplies akin to third world nations, and a dramatic shrinking of our economy, resulting in more poverty, food insecurity and desperation. Although medicine has come a long way since 1918, we cannot rely on the eventuality of vaccinations. If we can put politics aside, we can unite as a nation and overcome. We can persevere and conquer the virus, but to do so, we all must wear our masks and comply with CDC guidelines – that's a scientific fact. While the CARES Act provided a welcome stimulus, Congress needs to set aside its differences and do much, much more for Indian Country and the American people.

It is my hope and prayer that we all get through this and that COVID-19 becomes but a memory. As we say in our Apache language, *Ahi' yi' e* (thank you) for the opportunity to contribute to the Tribal Leader Roundtable. ♣