

2022 Division of Nursing Services Nurse of the Month: December

It is my privilege and honor to nominate Ms. Veronica Thomas for the DNS Nurse of the Month. Veronica serves as a Public Health Nurse in Maternal Child Health and is the Immunization Coordinator for the IHS Yankton Service Unit Wagner Health Center in South Dakota. Veronica was a Clinic Nurse for 7 years at the Wagner IHS and joined our PHN Program in September of 2020. Veronica has been at the forefront of the Wagner IHS COVID Pandemic Response and Public Health Nursing services for COVID testing and COVID vaccinations. The Wagner IHS was charged with testing and vaccinating people of all ethnicities and ages in Southern Charles Mix County, which increased our workload to an exhausting level. People came from more than 200 miles away for the drive-through testing and COVID vaccination we offered. COVID vaccinations were also given through home visits, going door-to-door, and at three local schools, clinics, Yankton Sioux Tribal business locations/entities and PHN office visits. This effort of providing PHN services to all people led to decreasing positive COVID cases, hospitalizations, and death in our counties and in our Native American population. These events led to a massive influx in patients seeking PHN services across the life span, with 2,891 new non-beneficiary charts created at Wagner IHS. PHN's were there to meet the challenge and demand, and Veronica's passion for community immunity was second to none.

Veronica attended every Wagner IHS Public Health Nursing Program drive-through event and field activity. More than 6,899 people were tested and 5,278 COVID vaccinations were administered. Due to Veronica's vast knowledge, expertise in general nursing, and work with the Native American population, she excelled in this challenge. Veronica has been at the forefront of every COVID vaccination event carried out in our three major communities of Marty, Lake Andes, and Wagner South Dakota. These vaccination efforts have led to COVID vaccination rates of 41% of 5-11 year olds, 50% of 12-15 year olds, 46% of 16-29 year olds, 55% of 30- 49 year olds, 74% of 50-64 year olds, and 81% of 65 and older. These rates are the direct result of Veronica's commitment to health promotion/disease prevention activities. Veronica was diligent about keeping up with her responsibility of writing immunization reports for the Great Plains Area and Headquarters Level.

Veronica also received her Master's in Public Health in May 2021. Her Capstone Project was developing a tribal home visiting program. Part of that was a project based on improving and sustaining routine vaccinations for the Native American community applied practice experience at the Wagner IHS. Veronica chose this project due to her commitment to improving health disparities in our communities, keeping children and families healthy. Veronica continued to provide prenatal, postpartum, and newborn home visits as time allowed, and to reach out to high-risk pregnant women. During these very trying times, Veronica has maintained a positive attitude, coupled with a sincere passion for helping our communities stay healthy and well.