

**INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE
2019 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST OF THE YEAR
CDR ROBERT MORONES**



Introduction

CDR Robert Morones, REHS, MPH, was nominated by the Phoenix Area Indian Health Service (IHS), Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE), Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) for the 2019 Environmental Health Specialist of the Year. As the Area Injury Prevention Specialist, CDR Morones is responsible for directing the provision of injury prevention services to nine IHS OEHE field offices and 46 tribes with a 240K population in the four-state region of Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of California. His expertise and commitment to the IHS mission assure the delivery of services in injury epidemiology, coalition/partnership building, training/capacity building, and community-based prevention projects to reduce the risks and incidence of injury in tribal communities.

Professionalism

CDR Morones demonstrates high commitment to the environmental health profession. He maintains the NEHA Registered Environmental Health Specialist professional credential, enabling him to broadly contribute to the IHS Division of Environmental Health Services. He possesses multiple specialized professional and technical credentials/certifications, including: IHS Injury Prevention Epidemiology Fellowship (2004), APHA Certified in Public Health (2019-2021), and SafeKids Worldwide Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician (2018-2020). Additionally, CDR Morones's academic achievements include a BS in Environmental Health from Wright State University (1996) and MPH in Public Health Practice from the University of Massachusetts – Amherst (2012).

CDR Morones is a highly effective and influential leader who consistently and unselfishly contributes to the skill and career development of his peers and junior public health practitioners. He is the direct supervisor of 3 full-time IHS District Injury Prevention Coordinators (GS12/O-5 Billet positions). He is the formal mentor to two current IHS Injury Prevention Fellowship participants and informal mentor to two additional current Fellowship participants in the Phoenix Area. CDR Morones is a principle IP mentor to 8 tribal staff operating Tribal Injury Prevention Cooperative Agreement Program (TIPCAP) funded programs and approximately 20 IHS field-based DEHS staff members in the Area. With nearly 20 years of IHS experience, 15 of which in injury prevention specific positions, CDR Morones is considered by IHS and Tribal peers throughout the country as a valued mentor, advisor, and injury prevention subject matter expert.

CDR Morones demonstrates extraordinary capacity in leading and contributing to the IHS mission. He manages one of the Agency's largest and most comprehensive injury prevention programs. During 2019 he led the development and execution of multiple team-based initiatives, including: coordination of the Area IP Mini-Project Program, revitalization of the IHS Ride Safe program, and negotiated a multi-state injury data share agreement. CDR Morones assured high visibility for IHS IP program accomplishments in 2019 by coauthoring four presentations at professional conferences, including three at the national level (National AI/NA Injury Prevention Conf.; National Council on Aging Conf.; and Commissioned Officers' Foundation Scientific Symposium). CDR Morones is the principle IHS representative and fall prevention subject matter expert on the

National Council on Aging's AI/AN/Hawaiian Evidence-Based Program Advisory Council on Elder Falls and at the regional level is the Phoenix Area's representative on the Arizona Falls Prevention Coalition.

Special Accomplishments

The national opioid epidemic has mobilized the public health community to implement treatment and prevention measures. Recognizing most IHS activities were directed at the clinical environment, CDR Morones took the initiative to lead Phoenix Area's efforts to establish community-based opioid poisoning prevention strategies. He worked with state-based epidemiologists to access and evaluate opioid-related morbidity and mortality data specific to the Arizona's AI/AN (the largest group of the Area's 4-state service population). Results of his analysis revealed that opioid related deaths, hospitalizations, and ED visits increased 310% among AZ's tribal population during the most recent decade. Little else was known about contributing factors and effective strategies. CDR Morones assembled a stakeholder group of over 50 IHS staff and tribal community health personnel to better understand opioid poisoning concerns, resulting in two areas of priority: (1) safe medication storage and (2) safe medication disposal.

Safe Medication Storage: One important concern identified was that of prescription medication diversion, specifically the vulnerability of elders as victims of their medications being stolen from their homes. CDR Morones led the design and coordination of focus groups among tribal elders in 10 communities throughout the Area where it was learned that the majority of elders did not securely store medications in the home, several experienced incidents of medication diversion, and nearly all had high interest in devices to securely store medications. During the focus groups, elders also provided feedback on different types of devices and locking mechanisms to store medications. Utilizing the focus group information, CDR Morones designed a novel Medication Lockbox Pilot Project and partnered with multiple tribal stakeholders (CHRs, Housing, Pharmacists, etc) to install 55 medication lockboxes in tribal homes in 10 communities. He designed an evaluation strategy whereby post lockbox installation home visits were conducted at 30 and 60 day intervals. The evaluation visits incorporated visual assessments as well as elder interviews to assess lockbox usage practices and knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about the safe storage of medications. The pilot project was a major success. Many lessons were learned on the administration of a community-based medication lockbox program (e.g., participant eligibility/selection procedures, procurement processes, installation methods, lockbox design, etc.). Safe medication storage practices dramatically increased from a baseline measure of 2% of homes utilizing locked medication storage to 87% at the 30 day evaluation and 95% at the 60 evaluation. With a goal of utilizing what was learned from the pilot project to inform the implementation of large scaled medication lockbox initiatives, CDR Morones and his team presented the project findings informally and formally at stakeholder/partner meetings, professional conferences, newsletters, and have prepared a manuscript for publication in a professional journal. As a result, four additional Phoenix Area tribes have implemented large scale lockbox programs, three other IHS Areas have duplicated the project, and Johns Hopkins University has received CDC funds to establish a national medication lockbox program to serve tribal communities.

Safe Medication Disposal: To compliment his work in safe medication storage, CDR Morones led efforts to identify methods to reduce the amount of excess, unused, or expired medications in the home environment. Through focus group interviews and home assessments he determined only 20% of elders properly disposed of medications. He established partnerships between state health agencies (AZ and NV) to assist tribes with the acquisition of medication neutralization pouches at no cost and the placement of medication disposal boxes in tribal healthcare facilities. As a result, 1,300 pouches and 6 new drop boxes were distributed among tribal community health programs in the Phoenix Area. To date, medications have been disposed of in approximately 600 homes and 750 pounds of medications collected in drop boxes. Additionally, the proportion of elders dumping/flushing medications reduced from 27% to 12%.

Summary

CDR Morones is one of the Agency's foremost injury prevention experts whose mastery of the public health approach and dedication to the IHS mission have had an important impact on addressing the national opioid crisis through innovative community-based prevention strategies. His work in medication storage and disposal has established the framework for program duplication and adaptability in tribal communities across the country. For his outstanding professionalism and leadership in injury prevention and innovative opioid poisoning prevention strategies, CDR Robert Morones is nominated for the 2019 IHS Environmental Health Specialist of the Year.