

# CHICKASAW NATION: A SUCCESS STORY

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## Chickasaw Nation expands health campus thanks to partnership with Indian Health Service

A focus on the quality of services and a commitment to excellence has led to the expansion of the Chickasaw Nation Medical Center in Ada, Oklahoma.

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By Betsy Barron

The Chickasaw Nation, headquartered in Ada, Oklahoma, is economically strong, culturally vibrant and full of energetic people dedicated to the preservation of family, community and heritage. The Chickasaw Nation was among the first of several Tribes to embark on Tribal Self-Governance beginning in 1994. Being Chickasaw myself, I was particularly excited to sit down with some of the brightest minds the tribe has to offer to better understand the ways in which Tribal Self-Governance combined with the Affordable Care Act/Indian Health Care Improvement Act (ACA/IHCIA) has made a positive impact for the Chickasaw Nation and advanced health care for its' citizens.

Melissa Gower, Senior Advisor & Policy Analyst, has seen the evolution of the Chickasaw Nation Medical System from its humble beginnings into the complex campus it has become today. "When we compacted (under Self-Governance) in 1994, it was a small, tiny hospital run by the Indian Health Service (IHS). Today, we have a medical center campus. It's amazing to go from this 'little bitty building' under IHS to what the tribe has today, a whole medical campus with a huge new hospital. The majority of our facilities have been built under the joint venture construction program because the tribe put up the money to do it. None of it would have been possible without Self-Governance."



The Chickasaw Nation Medical Campus today (Photo provided by the Chickasaw Nation)

In their research, the Chickasaw Nation learned that their average patient had to go to seven different health systems for care. The Chickasaw Nation is working to change that by creating a one-stop shop by prioritizing primary care and care coordination.

“Improving health for individuals using a primary care model with care coordination at its heart, positively impacts the health of the individual as well as the entire population and the broader community.” says Dr. John Krueger, the Under Secretary of Medical Staff/Quality at the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health.

“At the Chickasaw Nation, we are aware that health includes all aspects of wellbeing including biological, psychological, social and spiritual. We understand that having a healthy life is more than just healthcare and involves access to a host of services, a quality of life and a community that supports and promotes health. When it comes to the delivery of healthcare, at the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health (CNDH) we are focused on creating services that are of the highest quality for our citizens and patients. This means developing services that meet the standards of high quality such as those set by the Institute of Medicine and that is safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable and patient centered. Our amazing CNDH teams work diligently to assure that all patients receive the very best care possible.”

The Chickasaw Nation is focusing on building a healthcare system that creates choices in health care, rather than having patients participate in a model that makes choices for them.

In fact, the Chickasaw Nation is a leader in quality improvement. Self-Governance and the ACA/IHCIA has allowed room to improve the quality of their healthcare on their own terms, and it is working, because they're winning awards. Some of the most tracked measures include years of life saved, hospital days averted, and cost. They recently won the prestigious Oklahoma Quality Foundation's top award for Leadership in Excellence in 2021, a widely known honor which represents the best of the best in healthcare quality. The Leadership in Excellence is a prerequisite

to applying for the Malcolm Baldrige award, which is the next level of recognition for high quality healthcare. The Chickasaw Nation Department of Health is in the process of submitting for the Malcolm Baldrige award.



A “before” photo of Carl Albert Hospital (Photo provided by the Chickasaw Nation)

Despite challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chickasaw Nation has made the most out of the new avenues of care delivery it has created. Gower notes that it has enhanced the healthcare delivery system because of the possibility of virtual visits. Even the possibility of continuing audio-only healthcare visits for those who do not have internet has increased access for their patients.

Additionally, the Chickasaw Nation Pharmacy Refill Center has expanded to providing medication for non-First American spouses and has increasingly employed more automation, meaning that pharmacists are now more able than ever to get hands on experience and get back to practicing and treating patients.

Executive Officer of Revenue Brenda Teel points out that Medicaid expansion under the ACA/IHCIA has been pivotal in allowing more flexibility in their model of healthcare. “Opportunities in the ACA/IHCIA combined with exercising our authorities under Self-Governance allows us to do all these things that we desperately need to do for our patients which otherwise would not be possible.”

When asked what one word of advice they would give to tribal leaders considering entering into Self-Governance, Lieutenant Governor Chris Anoatubby was quick to share that it is important to start small. “We didn’t just jump in to do everything all at once. Just take a line item or certain programs, don’t try to do it all. Just think through it, plan it, and you’ll know when it’s time or whether you want to. It takes time to build this. It took us time. It took time to get that third party revenue. It’s going to take time to build the foundation.”

Gower agreed, sharing that all you must do is start with one program/line item. Some Tribes start by assuming the Community Health Representatives (CHR) and health education programs under their Self-Governance Agreements. “Just starting with those two [programs],” Gower states, “is a great way to get there.”

Marty Wafford, the Under Secretary of Support & Programs for the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health, noted that access, trainings, and their array of services has expanded greatly, contributing to the improved health of Chickasaw citizens. “We wouldn’t have what we have.” Further expanding on the point of self-sufficiency, Wafford added, “We are much less dependent on IHS funds... and that is a very big deal for us.”

Melissa Gower expanded, “Self-reliance: that’s Self-Governance in action- because you’re self-reliant. You’re exercising your Tribal Sovereignty.”

