

USU Blanding Nursing Graduate Created COVID Community Response Network, Continues Virus Fight | Statewide Campuses

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During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Navajo Nation was hit hard with cases of the virus. [Utah State University Blanding nursing graduate and Emergency Medical Technician \(EMT\) Dawn Dilego](#) was one of several people from the Blanding/Bluff area to jump into action and assist her community. Using her EMT and nursing training, Dilego helped create a network where volunteers kept tabs on each community member, making sure everyone had someone they could turn to in times of need.

Creating the COVID Citizen Response Team

Prior to her graduating from USU with a nursing degree, Dilego worked as an EMT for 14 years in her community. At the start of the pandemic, she began to hear stories come out of New York City where residents were found dead in their homes from the disease, not having a network of people to keep them safe and cared for. In her small town of Bluff, she knew her community could band together and take care of each other.

"I thought we were in a perfect position to avoid that because we know everybody," she said. "We had the potential to reach every community member. As a first

responder I thought we have to be ready to respond to these COVID emergencies. But I also thought we were in a position to be able to potentially avoid some emergencies altogether."

Dilego decided to form the Citizen Response Team. The response team was made up of community volunteers, including other EMT trained volunteers. Together, the team mapped and canvassed the town, dividing it into several regions. Each region had a team leader who would reach out to each person in the region, letting them know if they needed any help due to illness or being quarantined, that they could call them at any time.

"We made sure that everyone in town knew they had someone to call if they got ill or quarantined for any reason," she said. "If they needed any resources, if they were quarantined at home, if they lived alone, someone from our team, with their permission, would call them every day and just say: 'Are you doing OK, what do you need?'"

Seeing the success of the network, Dilego also volunteered the services of the team to the local clinic, who connected the team virtually to patients who needed help. She and her team would virtually check on people who had symptoms or needed help with basic necessities. She saw several instances where the team was able to provide necessary and valuable assistance.

"We had a couple instances where our contact person from the team was able to identify a person's health was deteriorating and they needed to call 911," she said. "That person might not have had a contact to do it otherwise."

While lamenting the fact she could not help more people, Dilego was proud of the work her team was able to accomplish. She gave credit to each and every one of the volunteers she worked with, knowing each and every volunteer made a difference.

"A lot of people in this community just showed up and did all kinds of amazing things," she said. "A lot of people were stepping up to the plate and helping the community. I find it very inspiring to be surrounded by people who are so community minded and service oriented."

Navajo Nation Struggles and the Excitement for the Vaccine

Navajo Nation was one of the communities in the United States that was hit hardest with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since COVID-19 vaccines have become available, Navajo Nation has been one of the best communities in distributing the vaccine.

According to a press release issued by the Navajo Nation, the community has issued more than 210,750 first-dose vaccinations and has fully vaccinated 88,891 residents as of March 25. Dilego is excited to see the number of vaccines so high in her area.

“They are doing a really good job on the vaccine rollout in San Juan County,” she said. “Our numbers are going down, although it remains to be seen with the data if that is because of the vaccines at this point. But I look forward to the potential that the vaccine provides for us reducing infection rates, reducing deaths and being able to you know get back to opening the community again.”

She hopes more and more people in her community opt to receive the vaccine. Seeing her area have the resources to vaccinate any adult that wants one, she hopes all choose to do so.

“As far as I can tell, San Juan County has vaccinated anyone who wants to be vaccinated, from the age of 16 up. I think we’ve done a stellar job. I would like to see our vaccination rates go up as far as people opting in. I think the vaccines exist, we just we might need more people to feel safe about getting vaccinated and choose to do.”

USU Blanding Provided Valuable Training

Dilego recently graduated in May 2020 with a degree in Nursing from USU Blanding. A non-traditional student, Dilego decided it was time to go back to school and, having experience doing EMT work, knew that a nursing degree from nearby USU Blanding was the right fit for her.

“As my child got older, I thought it might be time to go back to school,” Dilego said. “I’m a non-traditional student, a mother in her late 40s, and nursing felt like an obvious choice. I had some background in the field, the local college had a good program. It was a way to take the skills that I’ve already been using and put them into a career.”

Dilego also has experience at USU Blanding as an EMT adjunct instructor. Having already seen the impact the campus had on students, she knew it would also be the right fit for her in her continued education.

“I was already invested in the campus and the community,” she said. “Blanding is a great campus and having it in this community is a huge asset.”

During her time as a student, Dilego especially enjoyed her instructors because they challenged her to think critically and ask the right questions.

“That prepared us to kind of go into the field with some critical thinking skills and where to research and how to ask questions and how to know we’re doing what’s best for patients,” she said. “All of my nursing instructors, you could show up anytime with any questions and they would make themselves available. That was really important for me because I have lots of questions.”

Dilego is now a registered nurse at Blue Mountain Hospital in Blanding.

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