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# EXPANDING NAVAJO WATER ACCESS IS AN EXERCISE IN TRUST

*Community-led partnerships are essential in bringing running water to the Navajo Nation's most remote residents.*



## Case Study: DigDeep

### Navajo Nation, Southwest United States

It's easy to talk about community-led solutions, but what does it really mean to create authentic relationships that bring people together to make change?

For Emma Robbins of DigDeep, a California-based nonprofit that works with Navajo communities to get running water into tribal homes, the first step is in building trust with people who have good reason to be skeptical.

"They have been overpromised so much," Robbins says of the broken treaties, historical trauma and substandard services that have shaped the Native experience in the American West.

For all Americans who live in the Colorado River Basin, water scarcity is nothing new. But for the Navajo, remote communities and unforgiving terrain have exacerbated an already-dire situation.

Scattered across 27,000 square miles, the Navajo Nation itself is a large and diverse place, encompassing an area the size of West Virginia across three Southwestern states – Arizona, Utah and New Mexico.

Many on the reservation are isolated from major water lines, making plumbing water to individual homes prohibitively expensive. For the 30% of homes in the Navajo Nation that have no running water, they rely instead on water hauled over long distances, drawn from potentially contaminated wells or expensive bottled water from grocery stores.

Emma, a young Navajo artist and human rights activist who grew up on the reservation, is seeking to change this reality through sustainable, community-led partnerships. "People think, Oh you are from here, it must be easy to build relationships.' But the reservation is a big place, with different chapters, different traditions, different needs. Being culturally sensitive to this reality is critically important."

In each new community they support, the work is guided by a council of clients and local leaders from start to finish.

The Navajo Water Project is the first domestic project of DigDeep. The group began its water, sanitation and hygiene work in sub-Saharan Africa, before turning its sights back home to an alarming reality – that 2.2 million Americans lack access to running water or basic plumbing. Today, DigDeep's community-led projects are working to extend this basic human need to remote and underserved communities across the country.

### The Navajo Water Project

The Navajo Water Project, which began in 2014 assisting a single family, has since expanded to serve more than 300 homes across four offices. The project itself is the first community-managed utility alternative of its kind in the United States.

***"We have to show that we can deliver."***

**-Emma Robbins,  
Director, Navajo  
Water Project**

Each home served receives a new home water system, which includes a 1,200-gallon tank, water pump, filter, water heater and sink. To fill the tanks, a water truck makes deliveries monthly. To sidestep a lack of electrical infrastructure, DigDeep also installs basic solar panels to power pumps and water heaters.

To ensure this work endures, DigDeep puts community members at the center of every decision, from initial surveying to final installation, maintenance and training. When DigDeep completes work, it leaves each project chapter with trained technicians that can operate, maintain and help repair their systems, creating new jobs alongside new water sources, all managed by local government officials and partner organizations.

**It takes DigDeep just 24 hours to bring clean, running water to a Navajo family.**

Emma says that a large part of the work is learning directly from community leaders, on everything from soil composition to which families need the most help.

“It doesn’t do anyone any good to donate a water truck and then walk away. What about maintenance? Insurance? Fuel?” says Emma. “We have a lot of angles to cover on every single project to make sure it serves the needs of the community for the long haul.”

In addition to home water systems, Emma and her team are also rehabbing abandoned wells, working in partnership with local pipefitters to repair broken connections to the main water line and educating communities on water conservation practices.

### **Navajo Mountain (Naatsis’áán) Chapter**

In 2018, Emma and her team began their work in the Navajo Mountain region.

Bound by canyons on either side, the Navajo Mountain community has existed as a natural sanctuary for more than 150 years. Located in one of the most remote and sacred corners of the Navajo Nation, miles of winding canyons allowed many Navajo to escape “The Long Walk,” the forcible removal from their ancestral lands.

Of the 550 or so residents that live here today as part of the Navajo Mountain Chapter, many have maintained traditional practices. They also live largely off the grid – without access to electricity or running water.

In this remote region, hauling water is not only expensive, it’s labor intensive, driving elders – who are the bearers of Navajo culture – off their land and into unfamiliar larger towns with better infrastructure.

In one home Emma and her team worked with, a 94-year-old grandmother received running water for the first time in her life. “It was a huge relief for her family, who was able to keep her in the only home she had ever known.”

“It’s not just about clean water, it’s about mental health,” says Emma. “Most Americans think of water as a basic human right. But Native people’s needs have been cast aside for so long, and in so many ways. We have young people on the reservation who go to school without clean clothes, without a reliable shower. It wears you down, and it’s dehumanizing.”

“When you don’t have to spend your days thinking about where and how you will collect water, it frees up space for thinking about school, about the future of this place. It’s about hope.”

Creating this reality for every Navajo through expanded access to water is the ultimate goal, says Emma.

For the communities of Navajo Mountain, Emma and the DigDeep team have been able to extend running water to 18 homes and a new communal meeting house, a testament to the authentic and lasting partnership they have built with the community. As the Navajo Water Project expands to more families across the reservation, she will continue to rely on those closest to the problem for guidance on its solution.

“We are at a point in history where it really is up to us as younger Navajo to protect this culture and carry it on to our own children, and that is something that requires a lot of fighting to protect.”