

AI/AN Health Partners

August 15, 2018

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairwoman
Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
SD-131 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Udall
Vice Chairman
Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
SD-131 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski and Vice Chairman Udall:

The AI/AN Health Partners is a coalition of health organizations dedicated to improving health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). AI/ANs face substantial health disparities, and higher mortality and morbidity rates than the general population. The Indian Health Service (IHS) is a critical aspect of how they are able to access health care. However, the IHS must have sufficient resources to meet its mission to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level. We urge you to fund the IHS at the highest amount possible as you conference the FY 2019 Interior appropriations bill.

As health organizations that provide services for this vulnerable patient population, we thank you for the priority the subcommittee has given to the IHS. We recognize the budget constraints your committee faces, but we are also aware that for too many years federal funding for tribal health programs has fallen woefully short. In 2016, the IHS per capita expenditures for patient health services were just \$2,834, compared to \$9,990 per person for health care spending nationally.

While both the House and Senate FY 2019 Interior appropriations bills recognize this discrepancy and make many advances for closing the gap, the House bill specifically addresses the Service's need to have an adequate number of health care providers. The House-passed FY 2019 Interior bill includes \$70,765,000 for the Health Professions account, which funds scholarships for AI/AN health care students and loan repayment for health care providers who work in Indian country. The Service has reported that loan repayment for health care providers has proven to be an effective recruitment and retention tool. Despite the program's efficacy at recruiting and retaining quality providers, the IHS has been unable to provide this important benefit to all eligible applicants because of significant funding constraints.

In FY 2017, 788 health care providers sought and were denied loan repayment. The IHS estimates that it would need an additional \$39.4 million to provide loan repayment to all qualified applicants. The Health Professions account also provides scholarship funding for AI/AN health care students. In FY 2017, 331 students applied for scholarship funding, but only 108 received this important support. The IHS estimates that it would need an additional \$3.3 million to fill the 223 scholarships approved but denied funding.

We strongly urge you, as conferees to the FY 2019 Interior appropriations bill, to insist on the House-approved funding level of \$70,765,000. This will allow the IHS to significantly hire more health care providers, a key factor for reducing the disparity of disease and care in Indian country.

Thank you for considering our request. We look forward to working with you to improve health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Sincerely yours,

American Academy of PAs
American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
American Dental Association
American Optometric Association
American Psychological Association
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, Inc.
National Council for Behavioral Health
National Kidney Foundation