NIHB Navajo Area Representative Testifies at House Interior Appropriations Oversight Hearing on Indian Health

On March 19, National Indian Health Board (NIHB) Navajo Area Representative and Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim served as a witness at the House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies oversight hearing on Indian Health in Washington, D.C. The Subcommittee engages in comprehensive oversight of and writes the annual budget for the Indian Health Service (IHS), the agency that administers federally-funded health care to all members of the 566 federally-recognized Indian Tribes, bands, and Alaska Native Villages in the United States.

The focus of the oversight hearing was to discuss if the increased funding made by the Subcommittee has made a measurable difference in the health of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) and what other actions can Congress take to improve AI/AN health in the nation’s constrained fiscal environment. The Subcommittee has continued to make funding for Indian health a high priority. From 2000 to 2012, funding for the Indian Health Service went from $2.4 billion to nearly $4.3 billion. The hearing occurred at a critical time as many federal programs and services, including those for AI/ANs, will see significant budget cuts through the March 1st sequester. The IHS will see a reduction of $220 million, translating into lost funding for primary health care and disease prevention services.

On behalf of NIHB, Vice President Jim testified that, due to the hard work and commitment of the Subcommittee, improvements have been made in AI/AN health care as a result of increased funding to IHS. Over the past three fiscal years, the IHS budget has increased from 29% and has a current budget of $4.3 billion. NIHB’s testimony provided several recommendations to the Subcommittee, including the creation of a long-term investment plan to fully fund the IHS total need; the need for accurate and timely data to appropriately assess AI/AN health care needs; advanced funding to the IHS budget; and reforming Contract Health Services. NIHB urged the Subcommittee to uphold the federal trust responsibility to AI/ANs by providing full funding to IHS of $27.6 billion.

Other witnesses providing testimony at the oversight hearing included: Dr. Yvette Roubideaux, Director, Indian Health Service; D'Shane Barnett, Executive Director, National Council of Urban Indian Health; Dr. Kelly Moore, Associate Professor at the Centers of American Indian and Alaska Native Health (testifying on behalf of the Friends of Indian Health), University of Colorado-Denver; and Dr. Henry W. Fields, Professor, the Ohio State University College of Dentistry (testifying on behalf of the American Dental Association).

Subcommittee members attending the hearing were: Chairman Mike Simpson (R-ID); Rep. Ken Calvert (R-CA); Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK); Rep. David Joyce (R-OH); Rep. David Valadao (R-CA); Ranking Member Jim Moran (D-VA); Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN); and Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-ME).

To read Mr. Jim’s testimony, CLICK HERE