



October 26, 2020

Dear Tribal and Urban Indian Organization Leaders:

This week, President Trump outlined his policy vision to make Native American communities healthier, stronger, and safer in the [Putting America's First Peoples First plan](#), which includes respecting tribal sovereignty and self-determination, promoting safe communities, building a thriving economy with improved infrastructure, honoring Native American heritage and improving education, and delivering better health care. The President's Better Health Plan aligns with, and builds upon the [IHS Strategic Plan](#) that was developed through formal consultation and in partnership with tribes in the first term of the President's Administration.

At the Indian Health Service, there have been many accomplishments realized as a result of this focused approach. Some of the highlights include certifying and accrediting all IHS hospitals in the [Great Plains Area](#) and developing and implementing the [IHS Office of Quality](#) and National Compliance Program. Through strategic investments in programs like the [Special Diabetes Program for Indians](#), we have seen for the first time ever, a decrease in prevalence of diagnosed diabetes in American Indian and Alaska Native adults.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the pace of our progress and the coronavirus has disproportionately affected American Indian and Alaska Native populations across the country, a major part of the President's plan for Better Health is ensuring that COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics are prioritized for tribal communities. We are grateful that the White House continues to make our tribal and urban Indian communities a priority, especially for additional resources during this public health emergency.

I want to express my appreciation to the tribes that provided feedback and recommendations to the [Department of Health and Human Services](#) during its Tribal Consultation on Vaccine Planning. A reminder that HHS is awaiting decisions from many tribes with Indian health care facilities on which jurisdiction they would prefer receive a potential COVID-19 vaccination -- a state distribution plan or an IHS distribution plan. As announced on last week's White House Indian Country COVID-19 Update call, [Operation Warp Speed](#) is asking for tribes to submit their decision by October 30. If a tribe chooses to work with their state, they should contact their

state health authority. If they choose to go with IHS they will need to contact their local [IHS Area Office](#). We appreciate your timely attention to this important information.

IHS recently developed and will continue to tailor the [IHS COVID-19 Pandemic Vaccine Draft Plan](#) based on available information and your input. Specifically, we will continue to assess, respond, and adapt federal guidance as new information becomes available regarding vaccine developments, vaccine storage requirements, risk groups, and recommendations prioritized by researchers and guidance bodies. Thank you to those of you who provided your comments and recommendations. We will use this feedback to update the plan accordingly.

There are a couple of more items I also wanted to bring your attention. The Administration for Native Americans is hosting a webinar for Native communities, **Preserving Through the Pandemic: Navigating Telework and Work Outside the Home**. As 2020 continues to progress through the fall months, you may be experiencing fatigue as we navigate through the pandemic and its daily changes. Fortunately, there are tools available from community organizations, we can persevere through the pandemic and learn best practices for teleworking and transitioning back to working outside of the home. [Register today](#) for this webinar that will be held on November 5 at 3:00 pm EST.

And finally, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is initiating written consultation with federally recognized tribes on the proposed rule [Requirements for Additional Traceability Records for Certain Foods](#). The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act requires the FDA to designate foods for which additional recordkeeping requirements are appropriate and necessary to protect public health, and to establish those recordkeeping requirements. The additional recordkeeping requirements that the FDA proposes to establish are intended to make it easier to rapidly and effectively track the movement of a food to prevent or mitigate a foodborne illness outbreak. The proposed rule published in the *Federal Register* on September 23, 2020 describes the foods that would be subject to the proposed requirements. The list includes leafy greens, fresh cut fruits and vegetables, some types of fish, shell eggs, nut butters, and more. There will be three virtual public meetings to discuss the proposed rule. The first one will be on [November 6](#).

Please stay safe and let's all continue to take responsible actions to stop the spread of COVID-19 and follow the three W's: **Wear** a mask, **Wash** your hands, and **Watch** your distance.

I encourage you to visit our [IHS coronavirus webpage](#) for the latest information.

Respectfully,

Michael

RADM Michael D. Weahkee, MBA, MHSA
Assistant Surgeon General, U.S. Public Health Service
Director, Indian Health Service