

National Indian Health Board



NIHB Advances 17 Tribal Recommendations During Senate Committee Field Hearing

June 24, 2016

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: During the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (SCIA) [oversight field hearing](#) on Friday, June 17, in Rapid City, South Dakota, the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) put forth 17 recommendations for improvement of the Indian health system. The hearing, “Improving Accountability and Quality of Care at the Indian Health Service Through S. 2953”, focused on legislation proposed by U.S. Senator John Barrasso (R-WY), chairman of the Committee, and Senator John Thune (R-SD), titled the Indian Health Service Accountability Act of 2016.

Stacy Bohlen, Executive Director of the NIHB, testified on a panel including U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Acting Deputy Secretary Mary Wakefield; the Chairman of the Rosebud Sioux Tribal Health Board, William Bear Shield; the Tribal Health Director of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska, Wehnona Stabler; and the Tribal Health Director of the Spirit Lake Tribal Health Center, Ardell Blueshield. You can read the written testimony of each witness and watch a video of the hearing [HERE](#).

The hearing was one of several that have been held in recent months to address long-standing Tribal concerns about the Indian Health Service (IHS) and how to move forward to improve the overall accountability and transparency of the IHS. The spirit and intent of the legislation is clearly aimed at responding to the call of Tribal leaders, patients and the families of those who have had adverse experiences within the IHS system – many of whom have shared their stories with lawmakers and IHS leadership. Indian Country has been calling for change for years, and this legislation, and newly proposed regulations and efforts on behalf of the IHS, are proof that these stories are being heard. As Chief Counsel on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs staff, Mike Andrews, stated on behalf of the Committee at a town hall meeting held prior to the hearing, "The legislation we have drafted is for you. If it doesn't work, we'll start all over."

The NIHB’s testimony focused on outlining a path forward that will take meaningful collaboration and increased communication among the Tribes and Tribal organizations, the IHS, and Congress in the weeks and months to come. Recommendations include improvements in:



Figure 1: Chairman Roger Trudell, Chairman of the Santee Sioux and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Health Board, speaks with the South Dakota Congressional Delegation about the dire need for emergency funding for Indian health care and behavioral services.

- **Tribal Consultation** will be necessary to achieve the full potential this legislation can have on erasing the health disparities experienced in Tribal communities.
- A pressing need and opportunity exists within the IHS for **structural reform**.
- Attention must be directed at improving the **quality of care** at federally run IHS facilities by strengthening Agency-wide standards for hiring, management, and delivery of care.
- The IHS, and other related agencies within the HHS, must employ all tools at their disposal to **recruit and retain qualified, culturally competent health professionals**.
- Training must be provided in Tribal communities to **improve health and medical literacy**.

While the legislation discussed at Friday's hearing stemmed from issues with federally-run hospitals and clinics in the Great Plains Service Area, it is known that changes must happen Agency-wide in order to truly improve the access and quality of healthcare provided in Indian Country. NIHB's vision for moving forward to strengthen the healthcare and public health services in Indian Country includes enlisting Tribes and Tribal programs that successfully serve their people to create model programs and guarantee systemic change nationwide.

On August 29-30, 2016, the National Indian Health Board, in collaboration with the [Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Health Board](#), will hold a convening in Rapid City, SD to gather Tribal leaders and members with private sector partners to strategize and forge a path ahead for improved health services in the Great Plains Area. More information will be available on www.nihb.org soon.

Those who were not able to attend the field hearing, can send their written testimony within the next two weeks to testimony@indian.senate.gov.