

National Indian Health Board



The Red Feather Of Hope And Healing

Press Release
September 15, 2009
For Immediate Release

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IHS Director and Congressional Leaders provide hope to Indian Country about health care reform

Washington, DC – Traveling thousands of miles, hundreds of American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) from regions of the United States convened in Washington, DC for the National Indian Health Board's 26th Annual Consumer Conference. Dr. Yvette Roubideaux, Director of Indian Health Services (IHS), Congressman Frank Pallone (D-NJ), Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and Senator John Barrasso (R-WY) had an opportunity to talk about health care reform.

"I cannot overstate the importance of our partnership as we move forward. I can't work on trying to change and improve Indian Health Services alone. I need your help and so grateful that you are willing to give your ideas and recommendations because I want us to improve," said Dr. Yvette Roubideaux.

During the past few months, the IHS Director has held numerous meetings with tribal representatives. Acknowledging the challenges that exist, Roubideaux firmly stated her belief that there is hope in this new President. She told the audience the evidence is found in the 13% increase of the IHS funding, the Recovery Act dollars available, the ARRA funding for prevention, and the appointment of Native American professionals to fill positions at the highest level of federal government.

"You have advocates at the White House," said Roubideaux, "the Secretary said for the first time publicly that the American Indians and Alaska Natives should not be subject to penalties for having health insurance because it is owed to them, Wasn't that great to hear?...You heard it first! It has never been said before."

Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) said she has a book of frequently asked questions of Alaskans. The front cover has the question, "Do Alaska Native people get free medical care?" and at the bottom of the cover the answer said, "No, they paid in advance."

"Let us never forget that the first people paid in advance through the loss of lands, uprooting of people and culture, and enduring a multitude of ill conceived federal policy towards America's first people that our Congress has been called upon to apologize for," said Murkowski. In speaking about the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCA), Murkowski acknowledged tribes have been waiting and working for twenty years to have it passed and said, "it's about time for a Signing Ceremony at the White House."

"First people first! We can't reform health systems without fulfilling the commitment to improving the healthcare of the first people," said Murkowski in her closing remarks.

"We have obligations and a trust responsibility to provide health care for Native Americans, it is suppose to be free," said Congressman Frank Pallone (D-NJ). Pallone's remarks focused on the



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various health care reform measures that have been discussed in Congress and shared examples of legislation wherein AI/AN needs and input were considered.

Directly speaking about IHCIA, Pallone mentioned that this White House administration wanted to move on this issue which is support that hasn't been there in the past. The congressman urged AI/AN to be consistent in writing and visiting with their representatives to effectuate the change that is needed.

Senator John Barrasso (R-WY), known by many as Wyoming's Doctor, shared his experience in providing health care to native people from the Wind River community. He asked tribal leaders to look with a critical eye, and demand reforms for better services and better health care.

Senator Barrasso said he knew of one facility used by a tribe that has been existence even before Wyoming became a state. He shared that the average lifespan of women is 80 years, for men it is 70 years, but on the Wind River reservation the average lifespan is 50.

"This must stop. We can do better. We must do better, we cannot tolerate this," said Barrasso, "there is an increased population, a tremendous need, a unique history, and rising expectations. There is a need there like there never has been before. No one should argue against the improvement of Indian health care."

National Indian Health Board Chairman Reno Keoni Franklin has asked everyone to, "take a moment to reflect and honor the sacred traditions of all Native People, and recognize the importance of what we do here today for future generations. Our era of reform is just beginning to unfold through the leadership demonstrated by our Nation in responsiveness to our people in the provisions of health care they need and deserve. The elevation of the health status of American Indians and Alaska Native people will occur in our time; and that time is now."

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The National Indian Health Board advocates on behalf of all Tribal Governments and American Indians/Alaska Native in their efforts to provide quality health care. Visit www.nihb.org for more information.



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