

National Indian Health Board



The Red Feather Of Hope And Healing

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Andrew Joseph, Jr. testifies at Senate Hearing on Veterans' Affairs and Indian Health Service Cooperation

Washington, DC –The National Indian Health Board (NIHB) Member, Andrew Joseph, Jr. of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Portland, Oregon testified today before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to represent American Indian/ Alaska Native veteran health issues. Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) convened a hearing to focus on the joint efforts of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) to improve care for Native American veterans.

“Today’s hearing focuses on health care. Despite dual-eligibility for VA and IHS health care, American Indian and Alaskan Native veterans report unmet health care needs at four times the rate of other veterans. In 2003, VA and IHS signed a memorandum of understanding, agreeing to mutual goals and actions to improve cooperation and collaboration,” said Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI).

During the hearing, Andrew Joseph, Jr. said, “Our organization believes that the federal government must uphold its trust responsibility in the delivery of quality health care to Indian people, especially our veterans.” He outlined problems many veterans face such as the lack of access and coordination of care. Joseph explained that some veterans live in remote, rural areas and must travel great distances to access any medical facility, including the VA.



Joseph suggested the VA should create a permanent position to ensure the provisions of the MOU are carried out. Joseph asked that supplemental funding is provided for IHS to serve veterans and that active outreach efforts are made to educate veterans how to get available services. He also asked that VA health professionals, specialized in behavioral and mental health treatment, are available to assist tribal and IHS facilities in dealing with Veterans returning home from combat, who may require specialized care or treatment. In his closing remarks Joseph said, “I want to remind you that you swore an oath to protect and serve our people just like we do as tribal leaders. Let’s take care of our veterans.”

Senator Jon Tester questioned the Department of Veterans Affairs and the IHS about the progress their agencies have made in meeting the provisions of the MOU. He voiced concern



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about the belief people may have that the health care of Native American veterans is only the responsibility of the Indian Health Service. Tester asked each agency, “What grade would you give yourself?” referring to meeting the provisions of the MOU and said “figure out ways to work together to maximize the efforts. The VA and IHS are both funded by taxpayer dollars.”

Chairman Akaka said, “As I speak, tribal leaders are gathering for a White House summit. Such summits remind us of the government-to-government relationship the U.S. has with tribal nations and their members. For VA to effectively serve the many Native Americans who have shared in our mutual defense, it must also collaborate with the federally recognized government whose citizens serve with pride and patriotism.”

The National Indian Health Board advocates on behalf of all Tribal Government and American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) in their efforts to provide quality health care. For more information or to download a copy of Andrew Joseph’s testimony please visit the NIHB website at www.nihb.org

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