A PATH TO HEALTH EQUITY

How can the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) support health equity for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN)?

1. Center Tribal Sovereignty and Native Identity

Tribes hold the answers for Tribal health equity.

CMS can:
- Prioritize timely, meaningful Tribal consultation & ensure states’ Tribal consultations on CMS programs are timely & meaningful
- Empower Tribes to lead in health equity initiatives
- Change structures and systems to allow Tribes to work directly with the federal government and not through states
- Facilitate Tribal access to CMS data
- Set a standard for cultural humility across CMS programs and staff

2. Embrace a Strengths Perspective

Strengths-focused health equity initiatives support Tribal self-determination; disparity-focused plans often fall into government paternalism.

CMS can:
- Revise the CMS Framework for Health Equity to be strengths-focused so that it becomes a Health Equity plan rather than a Health Disparities plan; priorities should include identifying, utilizing, and cultivating the health assets and strengths of communities and individuals

3. Disrupt Structures of Inequity and Shift the Balance of Power

Changing the current population-wide patterns of health inequities requires changing the systems that created them.

CMS can:
- Ensure responsibility for addressing health inequities falls on the institutions and systems that created them, not the individuals experiencing them
- Acknowledge the federal government’s role in creating the health inequities AI/AN people are experiencing
- Empower Tribes to set their own health policies and systems
- Reform systems to ensure equitable treatment of AI/AN regardless of the source of care

4. Trace Policy Genealogies

Colonization has a far-reaching legacy; we must understand the historical and ideological roots of policies and identify who these policies benefit, and who may be left out or harmed.

CMS can:
- Work with Tribes to assess causes of disparities within CMS programs and address inequities in policies and operations
- Make an explicit effort to address systemic racism in CMS policies and operations - including in programs run through states

Thank you to everyone who participated in the 2022 Tribal Health Equity Summit for contributing your insights into charting a path forward for AI/AN health equity!
5. Increase Visibility of AI/AN
A chief aim of colonization was the erasure of American Indians and Alaska Natives; achieving health equity requires counteracting centuries of this harm.

**CMS can:**
- Ensure Tribes are involved in the creation of policies and guiding documents like the Health Equity Framework
- Improve the collection, reporting, and analysis of standardized data to better represent AI/AN
- Incentivize state Medicaid agencies to work with Tribal liaisons and Indian health advisory boards to improve collaboration with Tribes
- Expand collaboration of various CMS programs with CMS TTAG

6. Demand Fulfillment of the Trust Responsibility
Tribal nations have already paid for all necessary health services through hundreds of treaties and the ceding of lands. The US government owes both a moral and legal obligation to ensure all AI/AN health needs are met.

**CMS can:**
- Ensure the Indian health system has the funding, workforce, and resources needed to provide high quality care for AI/AN
- Be responsive to CMS TTAG policy recommendations
- Provide training on Tribal Sovereignty and the federal trust responsibility to CMS employees, state agencies, and other entities who administer CMS programs

7. Heal Backwards and Forwards
A person’s health status today has its roots far in the past; today’s living conditions will determine their health status decades in the future.

**CMS can:**
- Provide training to CMS staff and program partners on the ongoing impact of historical and intergenerational trauma in Tribal communities
- Ensure services are trauma-informed and culturally appropriate
- Recognize the historical, political, legal, and cultural context of health inequities and the communities experiencing them
- Focus on systemic changes that will improve health and wellbeing for the next seven generations

8. Focus on Relationships & Connectedness
Health equity is complex and requires a broad vision and a holistic approach.

**CMS can:**
- Adopt a holistic approach and focus on overall wellbeing, not just health care services
- Collaborate across government agencies to achieve health equity priorities
- Recognize Tribal perspectives of social determinants of health & address these determinants in culturally relevant ways

9. Honor Indigenous Knowledge
Achieving health equity requires respecting traditional ways of knowing and honoring diverse worldviews on health and wellbeing.

**CMS can:**
- Adapt reimbursement models to include culturally appropriate services, like traditional healing
- Embrace “promising practices” alongside “evidence-based practices”
- Support providers with culturally specific training, like Native doulas
- “Culturally tailored services” need to be designed by AI/AN for AI/AN
- Appreciate the diversity across Tribal communities

Learn more at:
nihb.org/health-equity