



March 7, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

On behalf of the National Indian Health Board and the 574+ federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribal Nations we serve, we write to express our concern over the recent personnel actions taken against Dr. Karina Walters, PhD, from her position as Director of the Tribal Health Research Office (THRO) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). During her tenure leading the NIH THRO, Dr. Walters has been an instrumental partner in fostering the government-to-government relationship between Tribes and the federal government. We request her immediate reinstatement to ensure that the NIH THRO and Dr. Walters can continue their work partnering with Tribal Nations throughout the United States.

The federal government has a unique government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations, and born out of that relationship are the legal Trust and Treaty obligations owed to federally recognized Tribes. This government-to-government relationship is repeatedly upheld in the Constitution, statutes, Supreme Court cases, and other legal precedents. Most recently, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [Advisory Opinion 25-01](#) affirmed the government-to-government relationship, clarifying that recent Executive Orders “should not be read to halt typical government-to-government relations.” An essential aspect of Dr. Walters’ role as the THRO Director is to facilitate the government-to-government relationship, ensuring that the NIH properly coordinates, consults, and involves Tribes on matters directly impacting them. Dr. Walters’ work at the NIH has proven invaluable, and her expertise in upholding the government-to-government relationship is unparalleled. Few people have the experience necessary to effectuate the change Dr. Walters led at the helm of the THRO.

While leading the THRO, Dr. Walters has facilitated key engagements with Tribes throughout the United States. For instance, in December 2024, the NIH THRO, under Dr. Walters’ leadership, hosted the Federal Indian Boarding School Healing Summit. This landmark event brought together hundreds of Tribal leaders to identify gaps in knowledge surrounding intergenerational trauma and align priorities across federal

agencies for a coordinated, community-driven response effort. Under Dr. Walters' leadership, the THRO also participated in a two-day Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit last April. During the summit, AI/AN data experts, Tribal leaders, and Tribal health researchers convened to help develop guidance on data sovereignty.

Additionally, because of her diligent leadership in coordinating the NIH's Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC), Tribes have built strong, collaborative relationships with NIH leadership. Through this engagement, Tribes and Tribal organizations have come to rely upon Dr. Walters to elevate Tribal views, information, and advice concerning the formulation of policy impacting Tribes. TACs are a primary way the federal government engages with Indian Country and are a critical tool in upholding the Trust and Treaty responsibility. Dr. Walters must be reinstated to her position to continue her work with the NIH TAC.

For her 30-year career working with Tribes, Dr. Walters' steady hand has created flourishing relationships critical to the NIH as it forms health policy. We urge you to reinstate Dr. Walters to her position as Director of the THRO. Consistent with Advisory Opinion 25-01, we also ask that the Administration prioritize Tribal sovereignty and honoring the legal Trust and Treaty obligations by exempting all Tribal support staff across operating divisions at HHS from further terminations and reductions in force. Tribal support staff are critical to realizing the federal government's Trust and Treaty responsibilities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Smith', with a stylized, flowing script.

William Smith,
Valdez Native Tribe
Chairperson
National Indian Health Board

CC: Dr. Matthew J. Memoli, MD, MS,
Acting Director
National Institutes of Health

Devin Delrow
Associate Director of Tribal Affairs
Department of Health and Human Services