The Indian Health Service (IHS) matches dedicated health professionals like you with opportunities in Indian health communities that serve people who need your care most — in some of the most beautiful areas of the country.

Planning Your Successful Transition

INDIAN HEALTH CAREERS — Opportunity. Adventure. Purpose.

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Successful Transitions

A Guide to Selecting and Settling Into Rural and Tribal Communities

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A Culture of Care and Purpose

A Place for You

You're a unique person with a distinct vision for your future. You envision a career in health care that centers on patient care rather than business concerns and a life where work, family, friends and community are woven together into a balanced whole. You want to improve the lives of those you serve and would rather experience life within a small town setting where you are an integral part of the local community, where you can know your patients and something about their lives and work with colleagues who share your values.

You value the unique cultural experiences our nation has to offer. You appreciate a slower pace that allows for a deeper, richer experience — at home, in the community and within the great outdoors. Your personal preferences may be focused on community activities, arts, crafts or outdoor sports such as hunting, fishing, biking, hiking, climbing or skiing. Whatever the activities you find most rewarding, it's important to you to have access to them — all while providing care to an appreciative and deserving population. An Indian health career is a perfect way for you to accomplish these goals.

The Indian Health Service (IHS) matches dedicated health professionals like you with opportunities in Indian health communities that serve people who need your care most — in some of the most beautiful areas of the country.

More than 15,000 Indian health care professionals provide much-needed care to American Indians and Alaska Natives at hundreds of hospitals, health centers and health stations, most of which are located in some of the most beautiful small towns and rural areas in the country.

Physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, dentists, nurses, nurse midwives, physical therapists and nutritionists work as an interdisciplinary team — sometimes alongside traditional healers — to ensure that Native Americans are receiving the most comprehensive and convenient access to care possible.

You may or may not know whether a small town or rural lifestyle is for you. We intend for this publication to help you fully investigate an Indian health career option as you search for the right opportunity and before you make this major life decision. In addition to providing a good fit with a specific team and facility, our goal is to ensure that people who come to work in Indian health are well matched for the community and the lifestyle.

There are several key steps you can take before you make your decision that will help you establish a successful long-term match:

- Understand and appreciate the work and lifestyle a rural health career offers before signing on.
- Learn about basic lifestyle options, such as housing, banking, shopping, conveniences, cost-of-living considerations, utilities and others.
- Meet with potential supervisors, colleagues and Tribal representatives at facilities you are considering.
- Learn about the personality of the facility and the types of people you would care for and work alongside.
- Visit the community to get a feel for its people, their heritage and traditions and gauge both your comfort level and get a feel for how you might fit in.

"You really have to enjoy getting out and being part of the community. In the city, you might not know your neighbors' names or see them except for coming and going. In a small town, you get to know people and get involved in each other's lives. You really feel a part of something." — Pharmacist, Wyoming

Each community, Tribe, clinic, hospital, health station and health center is unique. Within the following pages, you'll find a glimpse of what life is like within Indian health and Tribal practice settings. The ideas presented here come primarily from two sources. First, advice and anecdotes from Indian health practitioners who currently live and work in an Indian health community. Second, tips on ways to think about — and embrace — a rural lifestyle drawn from "Moving to a Small Town: A Guidebook for Moving from Urban to Rural America[1]."

[1] Urbanska, Wanda and Levering, Frank. Moving to a Small Town: A Guidebook for Moving from Urban to Rural America. Simon & Schuster. 1996.

We offer real-life examples and guidelines on how to approach an Indian health career, from both a cultural adaptation standpoint and a professional one. The conversation is framed as follows.

A Look Within. Be sure the small town and rural lifestyle is truly right for you.

Finding Your New Home. A look at the variety of lifestyles you can expect.

Adapting Expectations. Make the most of your experience by adapting to your surroundings.

Settling In. Tips on achieving a smooth transition to a new community.

Continued Success. Reflections on service and discussion of issues that arise over the long term.

Improve the lives of those you serve and experience life within a small town or rural setting where you are also an integral part of the community.

Professionally Rewarding

Providing patient care, Santa Fe Indian Hospital, New Mexico.

A Look Within

Your work ethic, passion and compassion define you. You take on meaningful challenges and, while acknowledging that financial compensation is important, you find tremendous satisfaction in the more subjective rewards associated with knowing that your patients' lives and health are being well cared for. American Indians and Alaska Natives continue to experience health disparities, including a shorter than average life expectancy and death rates from tuberculosis, alcoholism, diabetes and unintentional injuries that are significantly higher as compared with those of the general population.

Challenges like these don't scare you; they excite, invigorate and call to you — just as the small town or rural lifestyle does.

You envision a life that allows you to:

- **Live life at a slower pace.** Fewer obligations and less rushing around leads to a more harmonious — and less fragmented — life.
- **Spend more time with family and friends.** Without big-city traffic and distractions, you can get to and from work at a reasonable hour, allowing for more quality time with family on a more consistent basis.
- **Know people in multiple contexts.** Your barber might be your patient and your son's basketball coach. He might even be a member of your book club.
- **Be an active member of the community.** Home is so much more than a place to live with your family. It's where you lead a Girl Scout troop, organize a local recycling program or play pick-up soccer games a few nights a week. It's where people know you, not just your job title.
- **Explore and enjoy your creativity.** It might be expressed through music, painting, photography, website development or landscaping your yard. Small town and rural life allow time to pursue new or favorite endeavors.
- **Spend time outdoors.** You enjoy all that nature has to offer, whatever the season: Hiking, rafting, fishing, hunting, biking, skiing or camping in nearby state and national parks.

Health professionals who seek careers in Indian health share similar values and perspectives that set the stage for successful careers and fulfilling lives in small town and rural settings. In the words of a successful Indian health pharmacist in Wyoming:

"You really have to enjoy getting out and being part of the community. In the city, you might not know your neighbors' names or see them except for coming and going. In a small town, you get to know people and get involved in each other's lives. You really feel a part of something."

More specifically, people who transition well into Indian health careers and communities have:

"Do your research. Find books on the Tribe, the region, life in this part of the country. Understand the history of the people you're serving." — Nurse Midwife, North Dakota

An open mind about people, places and institutions.

You do not assume that the school system is inferior or that small-town people hold backward attitudes about politics or social issues. Get to know people "as they are" without preconceived assumptions.

Energy, passion and talent to complement their professional and personal activities.

You're naturally inclined to get involved. Professionally, you enjoy donating your skills and time to community causes, such as organizing blood drives or blood pressure, diabetes and well-baby care awareness-raising events. Personally, you apply your knack for working well with others to support local theatrical productions, coach in youth sports leagues or start new activities with others in the community with whom you share interests.

Participate enthusiastically with neighbors and community groups.

You enjoy the various levels of give-and-take among friends, neighbors and associates. When a neighbor needs a hand assembling a swing set, you bring your tool box. The next weekend, if she offers to help you clean out your garage, you welcome the help.

A broadness of mind that enjoys mingling with a cross-section of society.

While others assume cities offer a wider cross-section of society, you realize that in a small town you're more likely to interact with a wider range of people from different educational and socio-economic circumstances than your own.

Opportunities to apply these values to your life and work are as unique and varied as the communities themselves. One physical therapist who is living on a reservation in northeastern Arizona, says she and her partner participate with their daughter at children's story hour at a library on the reservation. "We're the only non-Native people there, but that's okay. As time has passed, we've been made to feel more and more welcome. It's a great thing for our daughter to experience."

Balanced Lifestyle

Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado.

Finding Your New Home

Almost all health professionals choose the Indian health facilities where they serve.* Based on many years of experience, we know that the long-term success of a match between a person and the facility is largely based on his or her — and the family's — happy integration into the community. As you are working through the process of finding the best fit for you and your unique situation, it's crucial that you learn all you can about the hospital or clinic, the Tribe or Tribes it serves and the surrounding community, before you decide.

Some (but not all) communities served by IHS and Tribal health care providers are among the most remote within the United States and Alaska. So don't be shy about asking questions or hesitant to search among a variety of communities until you find one that is right for you or for you and your family. The more informed you are about virtually any aspect of your move, the more likely you'll make the right choice and be better prepared when you arrive.

- Learn what is available in terms of housing, cost of living expenses, banking, shopping, entertainment and simple luxuries or conveniences such as the local ice cream parlor or coffee house.
- Ask local residents about the utilities and public infrastructure options, including telephone (landline, satellite and cell); water (well or city/community lines); trash and recycling options; electricity and natural gas or propane suppliers; solar and alternative energy options that many locals may employ; and local emergency preparedness customs including whether it is common practice to purchase and maintain a back-up generator.
- Investigate schools and continuing and advanced educational institutions in and around the area and find those that will meet or exceed your needs, as well as those of your family.
- Determine what nearby employment options are available for your spouse or partner.
- Actively seek out information about Tribal customs and mores.
- Discern how well the opportunities match up with your personal and professional wants and needs.

Once you've narrowed down the possibilities, visit in person. "Before your start date, visit the site you're going to or one like it," suggests a pharmacist in Arizona. "I got on the phone and spoke to pharmacists here and a few who had been here. Then I came out, took a look around and spoke to people. There's really no better way to prepare yourself than to actually go and check out a place before you make your move." If an in-person visit is not possible, conduct as much research as possible in other ways.

"Do your research. Find books on the Tribe, the region, life in this part of the country. Understand the history of the people you're serving," says a nurse midwife in North Dakota. The variety of clinical settings and locations offers some Indian health practitioners an opportunity to work close to or even within communities in which they were raised.

"If you show an effort to become part of the community and show that you care about people, they'll be forgiving of your mistakes. Showing a basic respect for people and their ways goes a long way toward building a solid working relationship." — Physician, New Mexico

A dentist in Idaho who grew up not far from where he's now practicing says, "This is where I want to be. I'm not far from where I can hunt and fish whenever I want. I own a home and my family is settled in. It's a good situation for us."

* The IHS Director may assign or reassign scholars and USPHS Commissioned Corps officers to specific facilities in cases of extreme need.

Adapting Expectations

Some providers opt to live in IHS or Tribal housing, allowing for close proximity to work and their colleagues. This way, clinicians can socialize outside of work and establish satisfying bonds built on group and family activities. One such example is the Arizona physical therapist who lives in IHS housing on a reservation. She visited the site in person and learned in advance that it would be a good fit.

"You can sense that in a site visit. At least I did. I found the staff to be friendly and welcoming. They really made us feel at home," she says, adding that, as in many cultures, bonding often centers around food. "Potluck dinners are huge here! We could do one three to four nights a week if we wanted."

Indian health professionals find myriad ways to enjoy the changes they make when they leave the city and move to rural areas.

"When I worked in Oklahoma, I used to get my exercise by going to the gym or spending time ice skating with the kids," says the Arizona pharmacist who transferred to a rural facility. "Since we bought a home here, we spend a lot of our free time working on the house and the yard. It's a great way to spend our time together and we can see the fruits of our labor."

Consider visiting your prospective new community in advance to get a sense of how you will fit in and, likewise, how it will fit in with your needs.

Discussions about the quality of local schools might be the same as they are in thousands of communities across the country.

"The key is to stay on top of your child's education, no matter where you're living," according to the nurse midwife in North Dakota. "My kids go to the local school and they're receiving a life-experience education that they couldn't find anywhere else."

That life-experience education isn't limited to children, of course. Health professionals who make a happy and successful move to an Indian health practice setting learn to adapt to the significant differences between the two.

"Make the most of what is available," says a physician assistant in Alaska. "It's so important to get out and see the local sights, have family come visit you if they can and get involved in the local scene."

Native American shawl dancer in rural country.

Settling In

Cultural diversity is what makes living and working within Indian health communities unique. With more than 560 American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes to serve, how well you fit in solely depends on you. A willingness and ability to take a non-presumptive, open-minded approach to learning about the Native people and their heritage is a significant first step.

"The grass is always greener where you water it," says the Arizona pharmacist. "You'll enjoy a happier, more fulfilling experience if you give of yourself to the community, as a person and as a neighbor, and you allow others to give to you."

As is true of moving into any new culture, success comes down to respect for local traditions and a commitment to blending in. The following suggestions will dramatically increase the likelihood that you eventually will be accepted — and even embraced — by the community at large.

Know local customs. Your integration begins with attention to proper social etiquette. Acceptable behavior varies significantly from Tribe to Tribe. On your scouting trip or at least well before you arrive, thoroughly research and learn about prevailing customs.

"If you show an effort to become part of the community and show that you care about people, they'll be forgiving of your mistakes," a physician in New Mexico explains. "Showing a basic respect for people and their ways goes a long way toward building a solid working relationship."

Join the community. Participating in local social events and customary observances demonstrates your willingness to become part of the group. These opportunities range from running local races or playing in pick-up basketball games to attending regular festivals and powwows. High school sporting events are also popular community events, particularly basketball and softball. Additionally, when invited to someone's home, make every effort to accept the invitation. Likewise, be sure to return the invitation; though don't be surprised if it takes a few invitations before a guest opts to take you up on your offer.

"You've got to give it time. The first year I learned so much — my role on the team, my place in the community, adjusting to a new culture." — Physician Assistant, Alaska

Paddle to Squaxin Canoe Journey Landing, Olympia, Washington.

Continued Success

Without question, Indian communities and the health professionals who serve them often face interesting challenges. As in any other practice setting, while most clinician/patient interaction is rewarding, you will encounter your share of patients who may have trouble with compliance. As in many private practices, you may sometimes wish for additional support staff. Also, you may sometimes encounter conditions in the field (patient homes without electricity or running water or some patients who live many hours or hundreds of miles from the hospital or clinic and have only sporadic transportation) that will complicate their ability to follow through on instructions. People who are energized by challenges adapt most successfully to working in an Indian health community. And they tend to be people who — in spite of potential challenges — do not isolate themselves. Instead, they jump in feet first to explore, learn and draw from a deep well of patience for the settling-in process.

"You've got to give it time," says the physician assistant in Alaska. "The first year I learned so much — my role on the team, my place in the community, adjusting to a new culture."

You may be the kind of person whose values reflect those seen in successful public and community health models. You'll find the work and the experiences Indian health offers far more enjoyable — and financially worthwhile — than you would necessarily experience in a big-city, private-sector practice.

A career in Indian health offers three career paths: You can join as a federal civil service employee, as a direct Tribal hire or as an officer of the US Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps. The civil service and Commissioned Corps offer generous vacation, sick leave, insurance and retirement packages, as well as a possibility for sign-up bonuses.

If you work directly for a Tribe, you can negotiate your salary and benefits package to best suit your needs and qualifications.

The Idaho dentist is enthusiastic about the benefits his career in Indian health provides. "If I want to take a week's vacation, I can get it. If I were in private practice, that week would cost me twice. I'd lose the money spent on the vacation, and I wouldn't have an income for the time I was out of the office."

Many Indian health clinicians say they particularly enjoy focusing on patient care without the copious paperwork, financial concerns and other issues found in the private sector. Additionally, when family or personal logistical issues arise, Indian health clinicians often have opportunities to transfer among IHS facilities nationwide. The physician assistant in Alaska shares that he and his wife will probably return to the Midwest at some time in the future. And there are a number of facilities in the region where they might target for transfer.

"I grew up in rural northern Minnesota and my wife and I knew we wanted to get to Alaska," he says. "We got involved with the local scene and we get out to see the sights and have family here to visit. It's a big adventure. Someday we'll move back closer to home, likely to another Indian health facility. But for now, I'm enjoying the work and we're enjoying ourselves too much to consider a move."

Careers in Indian health also offer the opportunity to move into advanced practice and administrative-focused careers. The physical therapist in Arizona boasts that many of her colleagues are pursuing advanced certification — an attitude she finds inspiring.

"It's so easy to fall back into a comfort zone and not challenge yourself," she says. "But everyone here seems intent on bettering themselves. I am really impressed with that."

All in all, for people who value challenge, direct patient care, an interdisciplinary team environment and atypical lifestyles, an Indian health career offers rewards that far outweigh those of a conventional, private-sector practice. Personal fulfillment, professional satisfaction and an appreciation for a unqiue career path — not to mention enjoying some of our nation's most beautiful country — are the common denominators for successful Indian health professionals.

"The pay is good, you get to travel to training sites that are typically close to national parks, so we tend to plan vacations around those trips," says the pharmacist working in Wyoming. "I spent a little time working for a major retailer. I didn't feel much of a connection to the people I was working with. Now I'm in an ambulatory care setting, really getting to know my patients and helping them. I'm enjoying myself and I'm doing the work I want to do. The plan is to stay for 20 years. Why wouldn't I?"

For more information on Indian health career opportunities, visit www.ihs.gov/careeropps.

Indian Health Service
Health Professions Recruitment

A Sense of Purpose

IHS physician with Native mother and daughter, Cochiti, New Mexico.

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The policy of the IHS is to provide absolute preference to qualified Indian applicants and employees who are suitable for federal employment in filling vacancies within the IHS. IHS is an equal opportunity employer.

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