



**American Indian and Alaska Native
Heritage Month Celebration
November 22, 2013**

*“Guiding Our Destiny with Heritage and Tradition: Leading the
Way to Healthier Nations”*

by

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Good morning! Thank you so much for joining us for the annual Department of Health and Human Services National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month celebration. I am grateful to have the opportunity to provide an update on the Indian Health Service and how we provide health care in the context of the rich and diverse heritage of the Native people we serve.

The 2013 Heritage Month theme, "guiding our destiny with heritage and tradition: leading the way to healthier nations" speaks to the vital role that culture and heritage play in strengthening our families and communities, and fulfilling our vision of a brighter future for all of our patients.

At the IHS, we are dedicated to providing access to quality healthcare for American Indian and Alaska Native people. The IHS is the healthcare system that serves members and descendants of 566 federally recognized Tribes in 36 states as a part of the federal trust responsibility. We do this work in partnership with Tribes, in the context of the government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the United States Government that began with the U.S. Constitution and was reaffirmed by the treaties, Supreme Court decisions, executive orders, and other actions. Millions of acres of land, which allowed this nation to

expand, and untold natural resources, which are the basis of our national wealth, were ceded by Tribes in exchange for the promise of the provision of services that would promote the health and welfare of Tribal Nations. That's why you may hear Tribes say that they believe that their healthcare services are "prepaid."

However, little of this history and relationship is known to this country's citizens, including many federal employees. But this history, along with some of its darker parts, is still present in the thoughts of our patients today. Forced relocations, mandatory boarding school attendance, the breakup of families, and the destruction of vital cultural and community resources over time have taken their toll on the health and well-being of tribal communities. Many of the health issues we face today and the health disparities we struggle to address are rooted in some manner in the history and experiences of Native people.

That's why addressing these issues is difficult and requires addressing the entire spectrum of social, economic, psychological, political, and educational challenges that Native communities struggle with on a daily basis. Providing health care for this population requires both a health and public health approach, and that's why the IHS works to provide and coordinate its resources across a broad range of federal, private, and tribal agencies and organizations to effectively address the complex issues facing the communities we serve.

At the IHS, we make it a priority to provide our services in partnership with Tribes. We believe that the most effective way to improve the health of our communities is to work in partnership with them. Our experience is that some of our most effective programs and interventions were developed with input from the Tribes and communities we serve.

In fact, Native people have a lot to share about how their culture and traditions promote health and wellness. For example, our Special Diabetes Program for Indians grant programs have demonstrated that it is possible to reduce the number of individuals who develop diabetes through simple lifestyle changes. These outcomes occurred in many programs that incorporated the local culture and traditions of the communities they serve. Providing education on healthy food choices that include traditional foods, incorporating traditional games and activities into fitness events, and teaching communities how to grow traditional gardens all help promote health and reaffirm the strong heritage and traditions of these communities.

One area where we see opportunities to improve the health and wellness of tribal communities is in the new benefits available through the Affordable Care Act and the Health Insurance Marketplaces. These new benefits are considered an extension of the federal responsibility in addition to the services IHS provides. While IHS is here to stay and patients can still use our health care system, they also can use or obtain other health coverage, and the Affordable Care Act gives them new choices to purchase insurance or enroll in the Medicaid expansion. If they continue to receive their healthcare in the IHS, this could mean more services for individuals and the communities we serve.

That's why we've been focused on training our staff to help provide education, outreach, and assistance with enrollment to our patients in our facilities. We also recognize that this education and outreach needs to be culturally appropriate and provided in the context of the patient experience with IHS. Many of our patients are not familiar with insurance, so they need help understanding how these benefits can help their families and communities even while they still have access to IHS services.

We've made a lot of progress in changing and improving the IHS over the past few years. However, we know that we have much more to do. We know that our efforts will be more successful if they are in partnership with Tribes and if they respect the rich culture and heritage of the Native communities we serve. The proud culture and heritage of Native people is a strength that we can use to ensure the future wellness of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

Thank you for all your efforts to help us change and improve the IHS and to reduce disparities in tribal communities with the help of all the programs in the Department of Health and Human Services. I hope you enjoy the rest of this morning's program.