

Community Liaisons

Paving the Way for Incoming Indian Health Professionals



An Indian Health Service (IHS) community liaison is both an ambassador and mentor working on behalf of American Indians and Alaska Natives to promote the IHS mission and share the vision and values of the Tribal community.



The Role of an Indian Health Community Liaison

Helping New Hires Adapt to Their Communities and Positions

Just as a new employee must transition into a new role and organization, Indian Health Service (IHS) clinicians often must adapt to the geographically remote environment and existing social and cultural structure of the local Tribal community. Making new employees feel prepared for their roles and welcomed into the culture can increase productivity and longevity, allowing them to greatly contribute to the health of American Indian and Alaska Native communities with whom they are serving. Key to the acclimation/welcome process is to designate a “community liaison” to guide and mentor a new hire prior to and during the first weeks he or she comes aboard.



Community Liaisons

Traditionally, a community liaison is a person given the responsibility of maintaining channels of communication between members of a community and a particular body or group within the community. In Indian communities, this could be a facility supervisor, Tribal leader or a respected member within the community. Working on behalf of the Indian health facility and the local community, an IHS community liaison should serve as:

- An ambassador who understands the IHS mission and is familiar with the facility and staff.
- An advocate who serves as the voice of the community and promotes the vision and values of the local Tribe.
- A communicator who regularly shares information about the community, local events and municipal issues with Tribal entities and community stakeholders.
- A leader who develops and maintains strong, collaborative relationships between the facility and the community.
- An outreach supporter who will foster goodwill and respect in the community.
- A guide who will introduce newcomers to the community while, at the same time, providing exposure to aspects of the Tribal culture — ceremonial events, observances, traditions and heritage.

Finding the Right Candidate

The first step is to identify the right individual to serve as the community liaison. Determine who in the community or facility would serve as a good mentor and guide. A person with compassion, patience and an ability to make others feel comfortable, accepted and heard would be an ideal choice.

A community liaison should be able to:

- Communicate clearly, effectively and tactfully, both orally and in writing with community contacts, facility leaders, staff, patients, families and local Tribal leaders.
- Work independently with little supervision.
- Maintain a high level of energy and a positive attitude.
- Multi-task in a fast-paced environment.
- Work with a diverse population.
- Present a valid driver’s license and have access to a reliable vehicle.
- Have flexibility in work days/hours.

Getting to Know the Potential Employee

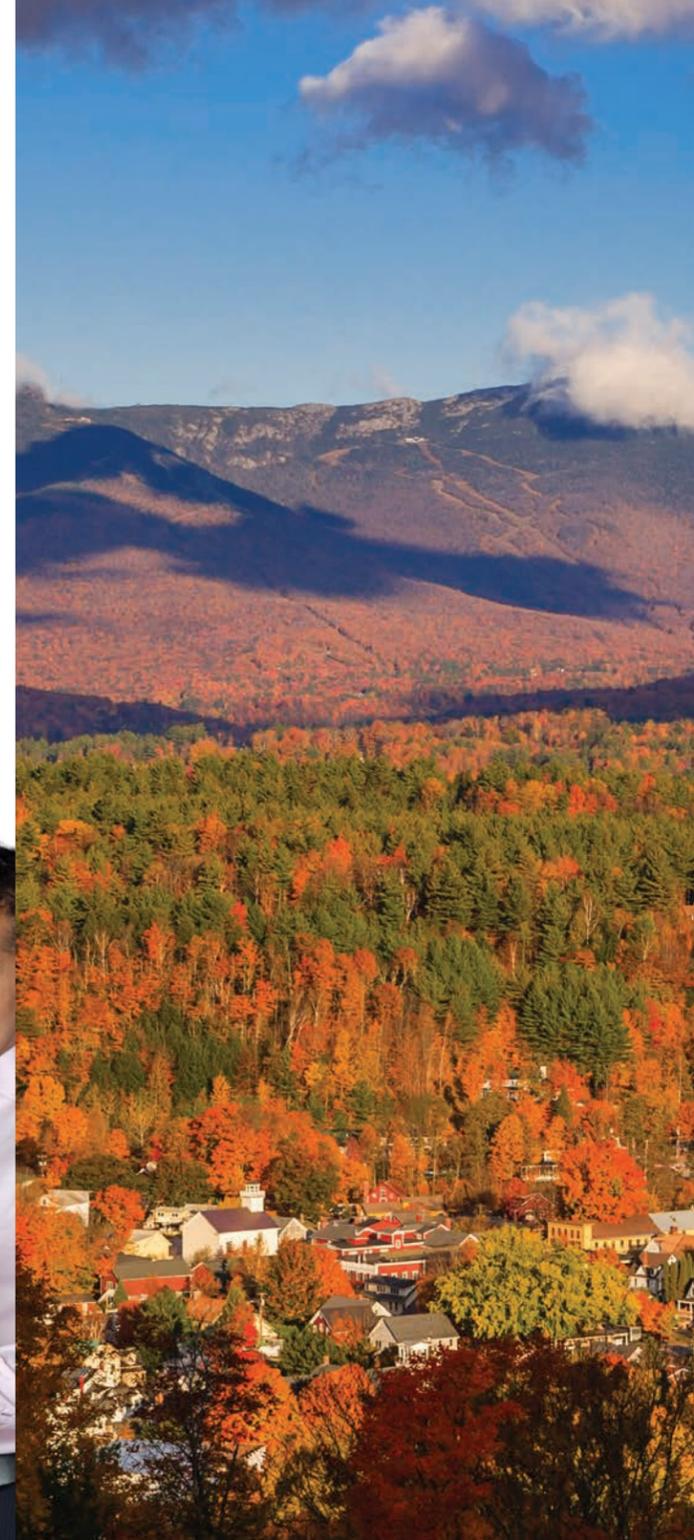
The next step is an introduction to potential new employees. This can be facilitated by the Clinical Director or site leader initially, and should be arranged either face to face or electronically.

Once the community liaison begins working directly with a candidate, determining whether a relocation to the area is the right decision is essential. The best way to determine whether a facility and community are a good match for a candidate is to schedule a visit to the area and have the potential employee meet the people he or she would be working with and living among. The community liaison should coordinate with the staff liaison to designate a time when most employees will be available to meet the potential employee. It should be a fun, social event: If team members are willing, a potluck meal can be especially welcoming or, if that’s not feasible, they can arrange to have food brought in to the facility for lunch.

The liaison should reach out to Tribal representatives, civic leaders, school board representatives and respected members of the community to invite them to attend the same “meet and greet” or schedule another event for the community. Studies show that many people consider social interactions and networking to be among the most reliable ways to gain needed information. A potential employee may not only benefit from the opportunity to meet new friends, neighbors and coworkers but also walk away with recommendations for housing, schools, banking, insurance options, etc.

The community liaison’s eventual goal is to ensure the potential hire is exposed to all facets of a new location and, ultimately, to make the potential move comfortable. Therefore, the liaison should:

- Meet the potential hire on his or her arrival.
- Plan a community visit, allowing the potential hire ample time to visit the local town, as well as engage with members of the community, discuss housing options, spousal employment, family needs and venture out to the surrounding areas and countryside.
- Arrange introductions, outings and activities to introduce and familiarize the potential hire with the area and the culture.





Preparing to Relocate

Relocation can be overwhelming in any situation. A significantly slower pace and traditional lifestyle of a Tribal community can be a difficult adjustment for a new Indian health employee. A community liaison should be there to assist new employees in acclimating to their new communities. This can be as simple as helping them get started with more comprehensive research about the community, including gathering information about local amenities and services before they arrive, such as:

- Housing options and availability/real estate contact information.
- Cost-of-living expenses.
- Local schools and registration/administration information.
- Public infrastructure options —
 - Telephone
 - Gas/Oil
 - Water
 - Utilities
 - Local emergency preparedness resources.
- Other health care professional services —
 - Pediatricians
 - Dentists
 - Orthodontists
 - Midwives

- Local services —
 - Veterinarians
 - Pharmacies
 - Dry cleaners
 - Tailors
 - Barbers
 - Auto repair shops and fuel stations.
- Local food establishments —
 - Restaurants
 - Bakeries
 - Ice cream parlors
 - Take-out and home delivery options.
- Area employers for spouses or partners.
- Local day care and babysitting services.
- Libraries and bookstores.
- Taxi or shuttle services.
- Pest or animal control services.
- Others as needed.

A community liaison's job also includes assisting the new hire in settling his or her family into the community. The liaison should get to know the spouse or partner and family. A good starting point is to arrange informal meetings with local families with children of the same ages; investigate employers in the area that would match the spouse's skill sets or background experience; and provide helpful feedback on local hiring needs, community job boards and logistical information for employers outside the local community.

Rural Health Care Realities

The more an employee knows about the realities of the area in advance, the better prepared he or she will be when experiencing them firsthand. And the more in tune with the cultural viewpoints and beliefs a health care provider can be, the more positive outcomes he or she will see when working with the Tribal patient population. It's important for a new hire to learn about the personality of the facility and the specific patient population he or she will serve and be made aware that Tribal culture can affect:

- What is considered an illness or disease.
- How concerns about health problems are expressed.
- What type of treatment patients expect.
- From whom patients expect to receive treatment.
- How health care information is received and processed.

A new health care provider should be aware of the professional challenges of working in Indian health communities prior to a site visit. For example, American Indians and Alaska Natives continue to experience health disparities, including:

- A shorter than average life expectancy.
- Significantly higher death rates from —
 - Alcoholism
 - Tuberculosis
 - Diabetes
 - Unintentional injuries.

Additional challenges include common practice issues, such as:

- Working with patients who may have difficulty with compliance.
- The need for additional staff support.
- Potential challenges in the field —
 - Patient homes without electricity or running water.
 - Long rides to and from the facility for patients with sporadic access to transportation.
 - Patient living conditions that complicate care plans.

Once a new employee understands the way the group's culture influences beliefs about health, disease, healing and health behavior, he or she will be able to provide health care services to complement those beliefs.





Encourage an Active Role in the Community

Physically relocating is just the beginning of adapting to life in a Tribal community. It's important for a community liaison to educate new employees about Tribal culture and remind them that fitting in with the new community will require a willingness and ability to take a non-presumptive, open-minded approach to learning about the Tribe or Tribes.

When working in a small town, new employees should remember that they're more likely to interact with a wider range of people from different educational and socio-economic circumstances than their own. It's best not to assume that the school system is inferior or that small-town people hold backward attitudes about politics or social issues. The community liaison should encourage new hires to get to know people "as they are" without preconceived assumptions.

With the guidance of a community liaison, health professionals new to Indian health sites usually find that adapting their expectations as they go and taking part in the community's culture and local traditions make for a smoother transition. What's more, blending in with the community and being welcomed by patients, co-workers and neighbors can be achieved if new practitioners are encouraged to do their part. They can:

- Learn and research the local customs in advance.
- Participate in local social events and customary observances.
- Participate in school or help lead a youth sports league.
- Volunteer or offer to help organize community and/or wellness events.
- Demonstrate a willingness to become part of the group.
- Allow time to build trust and respect.

There are many ways to fit in. Guiding a new employee in the right direction requires only his or her willingness to want to experience a Native lifestyle firsthand. When encouraged to adapt their expectations, health professionals find myriad ways to enjoy the lifestyle changes they can experience when they move to rural areas, such as choosing to:

- Live on the reservation or in housing nearby.
- Build bonds through group/family/sporting activities.
- Immerse themselves in the culture by living and learning the ways of the community.
- Take advantage of the beautiful surroundings the area has to offer through recreational pursuits.



A World of Opportunities

Today, more than 4,000 physicians, nurses, dentists and pharmacists — as well as 11,000 nutritionists, health administrators, behavioral health specialists, physical therapists, engineers, environmental health professionals and support staff — serve American Indian and Alaska Native communities throughout the continental United States and Alaska.

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 unique career path — not to mention enjoying some of our nation's most beautiful country — are the common denominators for successful Indian health professionals.





Indian Health Service
Health Professions Support
801 Thompson Ave., TMP Suite 450A
Rockville, MD 20852
Phone: (301) 443-4242
IHSRecruiters@ihs.gov

www.ihs.gov/careerpps

 Indian Health Service
Health Professions Recruitment



Community Liaisons

Paving the Way for Incoming Indian Health Professionals

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.

