



Indian Health Service Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2025-2029



LETTER FROM THE ACTING DIRECTOR

The Indian Health Service (IHS) is releasing an updated Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years (FYs) 2025-2029. The IHS is committed to improving health care service delivery and enhancing critical public health services throughout the Indian health care system to strengthen the health status of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people. This updated Strategic Plan describes what the Agency hopes to achieve over the next 5 years working in conjunction with IHS staff, Tribes, Tribal Organizations, Urban Indian Organizations, and other stakeholders.

Our mission is to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level.

Our vision is a health system that embraces traditional knowledge and practices to foster thriving communities for seven generations.

The updated Strategic Plan reinforces transforming operations into a ONE IHS. ONE IHS integrates efforts, resources, and expertise from across the Agency to achieve more comprehensive and meaningful outcomes.

The updated Strategic Plan details how the IHS will achieve its mission through four Strategic Goals:

- (1) Be a Leading Health Care Organization;
- (2) Ensure Comprehensive, Culturally Respectful Health Care Services;
- (3) Optimize Operations Through Effective Stewardship; and
- (4) Promote Proactive Intergovernmental and External Relationships.

Each Strategic Objective supports each Strategic Goal and sets standards for performance measures and improvement, success in one area will influence other areas.

I look forward to seeing what we will accomplish over the next 5 years. Thank you for your continued support and partnership with the IHS.

Phillip B.
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INTRODUCTION

Agency Overview

The Indian Health Service (IHS), an agency within the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is the principal Federal health care provider and health advocate responsible for providing health care services to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The provision of health care services to members of federally recognized Tribes grew out of the special Government-to-Government relationship between the Federal Government and American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribes. This relationship, established in 1787, is based on Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution, and has been given form and substance by numerous treaties, laws, Supreme Court decisions, and Executive Orders. The IHS provides a comprehensive health service delivery system for approximately 2.8 million American Indians and Alaska Natives, who belong to 574 federally recognized Tribes in 37 states. Comprehensive primary health care and disease prevention services are provided through a network of more than 600 hospitals, clinics, and health stations on or near Indian reservations. These facilities are predominately primary care settings and are managed by the IHS, Tribes, and Urban Indian Organizations.

The IHS provides quality health care services through a variety of direct patient care, public health service, and administrative positions. The IHS is staffed by approximately 15,000 dedicated and hardworking professional employees, comprised of a mixture of Civil Service Federal employees and U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Officers. The IHS Organizational Chart includes Headquarters Offices and 12 administrative area offices located throughout the U.S.

Transformational Operations to a ONE IHS

The IHS will continue to focus on activities that matter most to the mission of the Agency. Our commitment to increasing the alignment of resources to achieve results includes recruiting the right skill sets, retaining the highest performing individuals in a results-oriented Agency, providing accelerated training on the most important skills, and increasing the return on investment for training and development. A ONE IHS will help address these multiple dimensions by identifying common issues and goals that cut across different areas of health care services and developing integrated strategies that not only include feedback from Tribes, Tribal Organizations, and Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs), but are bolstered by 10 years of mandates.

A ONE IHS reinforces the behavioral expectation and culture of the IHS by clearly stating that everyone in the IHS is working towards the same mission. Our approach with a ONE IHS recognizes that many challenges and opportunities cannot be effectively addressed by focusing on a single program operation. Instead, the IHS will integrate efforts, resources, and expertise from all programs to achieve more comprehensive and impactful outcomes. Every employee, clinician, administrator, officer, and contractor belongs to something bigger than themselves. Together, we learn, grow, share expertise, identify risks, enhance safety, collaboratively work through issues, and share best practices.

Strategic Goals and Strategic Objectives

Strategic Goal 1: Be a leading health care organization.

Strategic Goal Description: The IHS is the 17th largest health care system in the U.S. To be a leading health care organization, it is critical that the IHS continue to improve and lead the delivery of high-quality health care services for AI/AN people. As the health care system continues to improve, focusing on enhanced workplace learning and safety and standardizing measures and outcomes will be critical to advancing the health and well-being of AI/AN people.

Strategic Objective 1.1: Produce workplace learning through practice.

Strategic Objective Description: The IHS will use strategies and best practices from regulatory and accreditation agencies and other leading health care organizations to put workplace learning into practice. This objective helps ensure Agency leaders and staff have the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to improve health care quality, safety, and patient outcomes.

Strategic Objective 1.2: Enhance the total system safety strategy to build on workplace safety.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective focuses on building on workplace safety. Workplace safety requires organizational leaders to make safety the number one priority and to demonstrate commitment by: supporting organizational training about errors and near misses; investigating errors to understand causes; developing strategies to prevent error recurrence; and broadly sharing lessons learned with all staff so they recognize the value of reporting concerns.

Strategic Objective 1.3: Standardize measurements and outcome goals.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective addresses the need to standardize measures and outcomes across the health care system. Tracking and displaying quality measures and using Information Technology (IT) to develop solutions to quality problems is critical in delivering safe, timely, reliable, quality care.¹

Strategic Goal 2: Ensure comprehensive, culturally respectful health care services.

Strategic Goal Description: Improving the health of AI/AN people relies on effective delivery of comprehensive health care services that respect and honor Tribal culture and practices. The IHS works in partnership with Tribes and UIOs to ensure the delivery of high-quality health care services across Indian Country. Additionally, the IHS health care system works closely with each Tribal community to address their specific health care needs. The IHS has a long history of supporting traditional healing and using community strengths to promote health and well-being.

¹ Chassin, M.R., & Loeb, J.M. (2013). High-Reliability Health Care: Getting There from Here. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 91(3), 459–490. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12023>

Strategic Objective 2.1: Recruit and retain a highly skilled workforce.

Strategic Objective Description: Recruiting and retaining a highly skilled workforce is essential for quality health service delivery. Consistent hiring and efficient onboarding practices may significantly reduce the lead time required to fill open positions, which is particularly important in addressing the clinical and support staffing needs in rural, underserved populations. These and related actions also enhance employee hiring experiences. Providing opportunities for promotion ensures that employees are developing skills and fostering careers within the Agency, contributing to higher retention. Demonstrated support for employee training and continuing education helps ensure every employee is equipped with the requisite skills to do their jobs at the highest level.

Strategic Objective 2.2: Promote employee engagement and IHS mission alignment.

Strategic Objective Description: The IHS mission is supported when all employees find meaningful purpose in their work. The IHS will promote employee well-being practices to cultivate a safe, respectful work environment that fosters a positive employment experience, promotes employee engagement, and improves workforce retention at all organizational levels. Providing opportunities for employees to consider a level of autonomy and self-mastery in how they accomplish their required work outputs supports innovation, efficiency, and employee satisfaction that can support retention, patient safety, and quality of care.

Strategic Objective 2.3: Increase access to health care services.

Strategic Objective Description: Increasing access to high-quality health care services is critical to improving AI/AN health outcomes and accomplishing the IHS mission. Central to this effort is using best practices, including models of care, to meet local community needs. Health care access can be expanded through developing a robust community health workforce, utilizing traditional healing, providing telemedicine and telehealth services, and ensuring effectiveness in purchasing care outside of the Indian health care system.

Strategic Goal 3: Optimize operations through effective stewardship.

Strategic Goal Description: This goal addresses issues of management, accountability, and modernized IT systems. The IHS is committed to sound management of operations, ensuring adequate facilities and staff housing exist to support health care operations, and assuring the availability and ongoing development of a comprehensive IT system.

Strategic Objective 3.1: Ensure transparent, accountable, and effective use of resources.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective supports health care delivery through improved management of all types of assets and non-workforce resources. By creating consistent and effective management systems, meeting quality standards, effectively using contracts, and maximizing revenue generation and use, the IHS will ensure that the Agency is effectively stewarding resources needed for health care operations in AI/AN communities.

Strategic Objective 3.2: Expand and improve environmental, public health, and facility infrastructure.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective supports the Agency's mission by building facilities or supporting joint venture construction projects to provide health care facilities and staff housing. The IHS provides technical and financial assistance to Tribes to help ensure accessibility of safe water, operate wastewater and solid waste treatment systems, and provide related support facilities. These activities support Tribal communities in achieving access to health care, public health, and healthy environment goals.

Strategic Objective 3.3: Advance data-driven/evidence-based decision-making.

Strategic Objective Description: Robust health IT network capability fosters transparency, integration, and access to the clinical, administrative, and financial data necessary to support patient care, evidence-based decision-making, and advocacy. This includes the development of a system integrated with health care facilities operated by Tribes and UIOs that addresses projected clinical, administrative, and fiscal data needs.

Strategic Goal 4: Promote proactive intergovernmental and external relationships.

Strategic Objective Description: Collaborating with intergovernmental and external stakeholders is essential to providing comprehensive, culturally appropriate, high-quality health care services. For the IHS, these collaborations first and foremost include Tribes, Tribal Organizations, UIOs, as well as Federal agencies, state and academic partners, and non-profit organizations. Leveraging these partnerships will improve and enhance population health and the range of services available to IHS patients.

Strategic Objectives 4.1: Foster external partnerships.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective addresses the critical need to implement and utilize existing authorities to foster partnerships and build coalitions with external stakeholders to elevate the health status of AI/AN people and increase access to culturally respectful health care services. This objective includes increasing partnerships, improving communication, and defining community and health-specific program needs.

Strategic Objective 4.2: Respect Self-Determination.

Strategic Objective Description: This objective addresses the importance of Tribal decision-making in Tribal affairs and the importance of the Government-to-Government relationship between the U.S. and Tribes through the enactment of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Tribal Leaders and members are in the best position to understand the health care needs and priorities within their communities. This objective includes engaging Tribes and UIOs in partnerships and building coalitions to encourage full participation in information exchanges and decisions to better serve Tribal and Urban Indian health care needs.

Implementation of the Updated IHS Strategic Plan

Implementation of the updated IHS Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-2029 requires integration into performance management, while ensuring the plan aligns with everyday work, involves all levels of the health care system, and monitors and communicates progress. To facilitate implementation, the IHS is developing action plans based on the Strategic Goals and Objectives, outlining the required activities, measures, expected outcomes, and accountable leads. The plan will be reviewed annually and updates will be issued accordingly.

The IHS is aware that one outcome from transitioning to a ONE IHS is becoming a High Reliability Organization (HRO), which is driven towards “performance-based management.” An HRO refers to the practices and principles implemented in the IHS that are required to successfully and consistently deliver safe, efficient, and high-quality health services and products to Indian Country as outlined in the IHS mission and detailed in the functional organizational structure. These operations are characterized by their resilience to errors and the IHS’s capacity to maintain performance under challenging conditions.