



Indian Health Service Press Release

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IHS Initiates Tribal Consultation on Draft Policy to Expand Community Health Aide Program

Patients could benefit from increased access to quality health care services in their communities

IHS today invited comments from tribal leaders on a [draft policy statement](#) that, if implemented, would begin a process of expanding the use of community health aides at IHS facilities across the country. Both facilities operated by the federal government and tribally operated facilities could see expanded opportunities under the new policy for these aides, a group that could include dental health aide therapists and community health representatives.

“Community health aides are proven partners in health and it is IHS’s goal to see them utilized to the fullest extent permissible in IHS-operated and in tribally run hospitals and clinics,” said Mary L. Smith, IHS principal deputy director. “Partnership is key to transforming the Indian Health Service, which is why IHS is initiating tribal consultation on this important proposed change to bring more health workers to American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Increasing the use of community health aides is part of IHS’s ongoing work to provide quality health care to patients, who are our first priority.”

As part of ongoing IHS efforts to increase access to quality health care, IHS is proposing to expand its community health aide program, including exploring administrative requirements for this expansion. This could include the creation of a national certification board for community health aides in the IHS system. IHS already runs an evaluation system mandated by statute to monitor IHS community health aides to assure that quality health care is being provided to patients.

Comments from tribes are due by July 29, 2016 as described in this [Dear Tribal Leader Letter](#). After the comment period, the policy is expected to be revised to incorporate feedback, then finalized.

Community health aides include workers in health education, communicable disease control, maternal and child health, dental health, family planning, environmental health, and other fields. Many community health aides filling IHS jobs come from the local communities and immediate surrounding areas. Examples of health aides within the Indian Health System include:

- The [IHS Community Health Representative Program](#) deploys more than 1,000 well-trained, community-based, medically-guided health care workers who provide health education, case management, patient transport, patient advocate and other services in communities.

- A [Dental Health Aide Therapist program operated by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium](#) is a community-driven program providing culturally appropriate dental education and routine dental services in 81 Alaska Native communities serving over 40,000 Alaska Native people since 2004.
- The principal provider of health services at the village level in Alaska is the community health aide. Chosen by the village council, the community health aide is responsible for giving first aid in emergencies, examining the ill, reporting their symptoms to the physician, carrying out the recommended treatment, instructing the family in giving nursing care and conducting preventive health programs in the villages. Community health aides also store and dispense prescription drugs with physician instructions. Read more about health care and [community health aides in Alaska](#).
- A behavioral health aide is a counselor, health educator and advocate. Behavioral health aides help address individual and community-based behavioral health needs, including those related to alcohol, drug and tobacco abuse as well as mental health problems such as grief, depression, suicide, and related issues. Read more about the [Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Behavioral Health Aide Program](#).

According to law and the [IHS Tribal Consultation Policy](#), tribal consultation occurs when there is a critical event that may impact tribes, new or revised policies or programs are proposed or the IHS budget request and annual performance plan are being developed. Read more about [IHS Tribal Consultation](#).

The IHS, an agency in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides a comprehensive health service delivery system for approximately 2.2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives.

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