



Indian Health Service Press Release

Jan. 9, 2016

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Indian Health Service Plans to Expand Community Health Aide Program *Patients will benefit from increased access to quality health care services in their communities*

The Indian Health Service (IHS) today published a report that outlines the process the agency will use to finalize a policy and implementation plan to expand the use of community health aides in American Indian and Alaska Native health programs across the country.

Community health aides are paraprofessional health care workers who can perform a wide range of duties in health programs to improve access to quality care for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Under the new policy, facilities operated by the federal government and tribally operated facilities could see expanded opportunities for using these aides, a group that could include dental health aide therapists and workers in substance use and suicide prevention, health education, communicable disease control, maternal and child health, environmental health, and other fields.

“Increased access to health care is a top priority for IHS, and community health aides expand much-needed health services for American Indian and Alaska Native communities,” said Mary L. Smith, IHS principal deputy director. “I thank all of our tribal partners for sharing their feedback, and I look forward to their continued participation and partnership as we work together to develop a robust implementation plan. Community health aides are already providing quality health care in some parts of Indian Country, and with the expansion of this program, Native American communities across the nation will have access to these valuable health workers.”

In June 2016, [IHS invited comments from tribal leaders on a draft policy statement](#) to begin a process of expanding the use of community health aides at IHS facilities across the country. Today’s announcement includes a report summarizing the comments received during three consultation meetings and other comments sent directly to IHS.

As described in the report, IHS will establish a national workgroup that includes tribal leaders and outside experts to advise IHS on the development of a new policy and implementation plan for the Community Health Aide Program. IHS will then seek input through the formal tribal consultation process, and finalize the policy. IHS already runs an evaluation system mandated by statute to monitor current IHS community health aides to assure that quality health care is being provided to patients.

The [Report on the Tribal Consultation for the IHS Policy Statement on Creating a National IHS Community Health Aide Program](#) and [Dear Tribal Leader Letter](#) announcing the report are available on the IHS website.

Last August, through the Community Health Aide Program Certification Board it manages, [IHS certified the latest group of community health aides in Alaska](#), totaling 171 behavioral health, dental health and other aides and practitioners.

Many community health aides come from the local communities and immediate surrounding areas.

Examples of health aides now in place across the national Indian health system include:

- A [Dental Health Aide 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/practitioner](#). Chosen by the village council, the community health aide/practitioner is responsible for giving first aid in emergencies, examining the ill, reporting their symptoms to a 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 in accordance with physician instructions.
- 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 use as well as mental health problems such as grief, depression, suicide and related issues.

Consistent with an Executive Order and the [IHS Tribal Consultation Policy](#), tribal consultation occurs when new or revised policies or programs are proposed. Read more about IHS Tribal Consultation: <https://www.ihs.gov/tribalconsultation>.

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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