

AI/AN Health Partners

December 1, 2020

The Honorable Betty McCollum
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
B-308 Rayburn Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
1124 Longworth Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman McCollum and Ranking Member Joyce:

The AI/AN Health Partners is a coalition of health organizations dedicated to improving health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). AI/ANs face substantial health disparities, and higher mortality and morbidity rates than the general population. The Indian Health Service (IHS) is a critical aspect of how they are able to access health care. However, the IHS must have sufficient resources to meet its mission to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level. We urge you to fund the IHS at the highest amount possible as you work to finalize the fiscal year 2021 Interior Appropriations bill.

As health organizations that provide services for this vulnerable patient population, we thank you for the priority the Subcommittee has given the IHS in the Committee's fiscal year 2021 Interior Appropriations bill. We were pleased that the Committee provided \$72,299,000 for the Indian Health Professions, an increase of \$6,674,000 over current funding. We also appreciated the Committee's appropriation of \$33,975,000 for equipment which is \$5,888,000 above current funding. Together, these increases will help recruit and retain providers in Indian country.

The Administration requested \$125,000,000 for an electronic health record (EHR) system in its fiscal year 2021 budget. The CARES bill appropriated \$65,000,000 for the EHR and the House-passed fiscal year 2021 Interior bill completed the funding by adding \$61,000,000. We are grateful that between the two bills, the Committee has been able to support the entire request.

The Senate Interior Appropriations Committee's fiscal year 2021 appropriations bill did not reach these levels and we strongly urge that as you reconcile the bills that you maintain the House-passed funding levels for all of the above line items.

Both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees recognize the need to address funding 105(l) lease agreements. However, we are concerned about the approach included in the Senate Interior Appropriations bill that sets up a "robbing Peter to pay Paul" situation.

The Senate bill increases funding for the IHS overall by roughly \$163 million. However, just under 62 percent of that increase is solely for the appropriation for 105(l) leases. While Tribes strongly support

the creation of a separate account for 501(l) leases, there must be adequate support to cover increases for other line items. The Senate bill calls for shifting funding from important line items like Hospitals & Health Clinics. The Senate FY 2021 appropriation for Hospitals & Health Clinics is \$78,000,000 below current funding and \$241,047,000 below the House committee mark.

As Indian Country battles some of the highest COVID-19 infection rates, now is not the time to decrease funding in the Hospitals & Health Clinics line item. As of November 29, 2020, the IHS reported that 104,256 Native Americans tested positive for the coronavirus, an 8.2 percent positivity rate. Public health professionals have recommended that states seek a positivity rate of 5 percent or below.

For fiscal year 2021, we urge you to maintain the House-passed amount of \$4,122,177,000 for the Hospitals & Health Clinics funding so that the IHS can effectively work to reduce the COVID-19 rate in Indian country.

Thank you for considering our requests. We look forward to working with you to improve health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Sincerely yours,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Academy of Dermatology Association
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Dental Association
American Optometric Association
American Physical Therapy Association
Association of American Indian Physicians
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, Inc. (COA)