



Direct Service Tribes

As Long as the Grass Grows and the Rivers Flow.

January 7, 2009

Yvette Roubideaux, M.D.
Obama-Biden Presidential Team
Health and Human Services

Dear Dr. Roubideaux:

Thank you for providing the Direct Service Tribes Advisory Committee (DSTAC) the opportunity to share with you and the Obama-Biden Transition Team the health care issues and priorities of American Indians who receive health care services directly from the Indian Health Service (IHS). These tribes are referred to in the IHS as Direct Service Tribes (DST).

Listed below are the three top DST Priority Issues for FY 2009:

1. Contract Health Services
 - Full funding to meet deferred services
 - Full funding to meet above priority level 1 in all IHS Areas
 - Recommend and support a review and evaluation of the IHS Contract Health Service Program policies for revisions to improve use of funds and health
2. Health Care Facilities
 - New and replacement facilities
 - Full funding for equipment/staff
 - Environmental health infrastructure
3. Behavioral Health
 - Coordinate Tribal/Federal program efforts to deal with suicide, domestic violence, substance abuse, and sexual abuse of children
 - Treatment/prevention focus on methamphetamine abuse and suicide
 - Holistic medicine approach incorporated with Traditional and Western approach

In addition to the above, DSTAC members raised additional concerns during our conference call. We hereby request that the following concerns also be noted:

1. Funding.
 - This is an over arching issue that permeates each of our priorities above and impacts the effectiveness of all IHS funded programs whether operated directly by the IHS or through compacts and contracts by Tribes and Tribal Organizations. Many DSTAC members related to you their concerns over being funded at less than half of what it costs to provide basic health care for Federal government employees. Without adequate funding, IHS facilities cannot hire the staff necessary to ensure adequate health care resulting in continued disparities for Indian people. The Obama Administration must make increasing funding to the Indian Health Service a priority over the next four years. A one billion dollar increase in



each of the next four years is necessary to bring IHS funded programs up to a level comparable to that provided to Federal Government employees.

2. Tribal Co-pays.
 - American Indians and Alaska Natives have sacrificed greatly for this nation. Indian Tribes have exchanged millions of square acres of land for an assurance that their education and healthcare needs would be met. As a result of inadequate funding and support, some Tribes are considering charging co-pays to Tribal members as a way of enhancing revenues. This practice is more likely going to result in eligible American Indians and Alaska Natives failing to seek care when needed and could result in a shift of the patient workload away from Tribal programs who charge a co-pay to IHS (DST) facilities, further diminishing their ability to serve local Tribal members. The Obama Administration should prohibit the practice of charging co-pays for services that have already been paid for in land and blood.
3. Indian Healthcare Improvement Act
 - Failing to pass the Indian Healthcare Improvement Act (IHICIA) is a blemish on both Congress and this past Administration. The DSTAC believes the Obama Administration should work actively to assure passage of the IHICIA within the first 100 days of the new Administration.
4. Elevation of the IHS Director
 - Several DSTAC members spoke about the importance of elevating the Director of the Indian Health Service to the Assistant Secretary level in the Department of Health and Human Services. Such an elevation would ensure that this important position for American Indians and Alaska Natives can be an office with responsibility to advocate forcefully for increases in IHS appropriations and to ensure tribal input and timely publication of Federal regulations that affect Indian health programs.

Thank you for your time and interest in the health care issues of American Indians and Alaska Natives. If I can answer any questions or provide additional information, I can be contacted at (918) 762-3621 or by e-mail at VWills@pawneenation.org.

Sincerely,

George E. Howell
Chairman

Direct Service Tribes Advisory Committee

cc: DSTAC Members
Robert McSwain, IHS Director
Randy Grinnell, IHS Deputy Director of Management Operations
IHS Area Directors
Ron Demaray, Acting Director, IHS-OTP
Hankie Ortiz, Director, IHS-OTSG