

Udall Leads Bipartisan Group of Senators Urging Vice President Pence to Ensure Coronavirus Resources for Tribes and Urban Native Communities

Category: Policy Blog

written by Meredith Raimondi | March 12, 2020

Call comes as first case is confirmed in Indian Country, and following Congressional approval of coronavirus emergency funding bill that includes \$40 million in funds for Tribes, Tribal organizations and Urban Indian Health Organizations

WASHINGTON — Today, **U.S. Senator Tom Udall (D-N.M.)**, vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, led a bipartisan group of 27 senators in writing to Vice President Mike Pence requesting the administration meaningfully engage with Native communities and Tribal leaders on their response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The senators sent the letter following congressional passage of a coronavirus emergency supplemental appropriations bill that includes \$40 million for Tribes, Tribal organizations and Urban Indian Health Organizations impacted by COVID-19.

In addition to Udall, the letter is signed by Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), and U.S. Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), Jack Reed (D-R.I.), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), Jacky Rosen (D-Nev.), Patty Murray (D-Wash.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Jon Tester (D-Mont.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Gary Peters (D-Mich.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.), Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.), and Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.).

The United States has confirmed COVID-19 cases in a number of states where Tribes and urban Indian communities are located. Given these developments and past issues accessing federal resources for the Zika, Ebola, H1N1, and SARS outbreaks, Tribes and Urban Indian Organizations are concerned that federal COVID-19 response efforts and resources will not reach them.

In their letter to the Vice President, the senators wrote, “As you undertake your work leading the Administration’s 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) response, [we] urge you to meaningfully engage with Native communities and Tribal leaders.”

“The U.S. government has specific trust and treaty responsibilities to provide American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) with comprehensive quality healthcare. While the IHS serves as the primary agency charged with provision of AI/AN healthcare, all federal healthcare-related programs and initiatives – including the COVID-19 response – share equally in the requirement to fulfill these trust and treaty obligations,” **the senators continued**.

“Additionally, to ensure proper precautions and response measures are deployed efficiently, it is imperative that Tribal and urban Indian health teams have access to Congressionally-allocated

COVID-19 resources and the most up-to-date information regarding the presence of COVID-19 in their communities,” **wrote the senators.**

The full text of the letter can be found below and [HERE](#).

Dear Mr. Vice President,

As you undertake your work leading the Administration’s 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) response, we urge you to meaningfully engage with Native communities and Tribal leaders. Specifically, we ask that you ensure the Administration:

- Includes a representative of the Indian Health Service (IHS) on the Administration’s COVID-19 task force;*
- Provides Tribal leaders, Tribal health departments, and urban Indian health programs with equal access to COVID-19 related information that is provided to their state and local counterparts; and*
- Directs all COVID-19 resources identified by Congress for Native communities’ use to impacted IHS facilities, Tribes, and urban Indian health programs in a timely manner.*

The U.S. government has specific trust and treaty responsibilities to provide American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) with comprehensive quality healthcare. While the IHS serves as the primary agency charged with provision of AI/AN healthcare, all federal healthcare-related programs and initiatives – including the COVID-19 response – share equally in the requirement to fulfill these trust and treaty obligations.

Additionally, to ensure proper precautions and response measures are deployed efficiently, it is imperative that Tribal and urban Indian health teams have access to Congressionally-allocated COVID-19 resources and the most up-to-date information regarding the presence of COVID-19 in their communities. As the IHS noted in its February 24th announcement, the state of the COVID-19 threat “is a rapidly evolving situation, and information is likely to become dated quickly.”[1] As such, it is incumbent on the Administration to keep Indian Tribes, Tribal health departments, and urban Indian health programs apprised of any relevant developments in real time.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. We look forward to working with you to uphold the Federal government’s Tribal trust and treaty responsibilities and to engage in meaningful government-to-government relations with Indian Tribes and urban Indian communities regarding the national COVID-19 response.

Sincerely,