

PRESS RELEASE: NCUIH Testified Before House on COVID-19 Impacts in Indian Country

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Washington, D.C. (March 23, 2021) – National Council of Urban Indian Health CEO Francys Crevier (Algonquin) testified before the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States, led by Chair Teresa Leger Fernández (D-NM). The hearing is addressed the “Emerging Coronavirus Impacts in Indian Country.”

“Urban Indian Organizations have continuously provided services in the hardest hit urban areas during the entire pandemic,” said Crevier. “There have been vast improvements from where we were a year ago with regards to the availability of supplies, tests, and vaccines, but that will never make up for the sheer number of Native lives lost. Unfortunately, despite improvements, the situation facing Natives has not relented. The bottom line is that what little data exists for Natives shows a stark reality: COVID-19 is killing Native Americans at a faster rate than any other community.”

Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), an urban Indian health champion, requested additional information about why Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) cannot make any facilities-related upgrades using federal funds. Ms. Crevier explained that the Indian Health Care Improvement Act contains unnecessary limitations on UIOs and urged for a legislative fix to allow UIOs to use federal funds for facilities. Rep. Chuy Garcia (D-IL) discussed the long-standing inequities experienced by UIOs due to lack of full funding.

“Structural deficiencies led to the devastating impact of COVID-19 on Native American communities,” Said Rep. Leger Fernandez. “We must also identify ways to address the root causes of the impacts. I heard over and over in today’s testimony about the need for full funding as is required by the trust responsibility.”

House Natural Resources Chairman Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) asked Francys Crevier about the importance of an urban confer process. She identified why it is critical for federal agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to have policies that address communicating with UIOs. Ranking Member Don Young (R-AK) discussed the re-introduction of the [Rep. Betty McCollum advance appropriations bill](#) for all of the Indian Health Service, including UIOs.

The hearing also included [testimony](#) from Chief William Smith, Chairperson and Alaska Area Representative, National Indian Health Board. In his testimony, Chief Smith highlighted the importance of extending permanent 100% Federal Medical Assistance Percentages to UIOs and the need for mandatory appropriations for the Indian Health Service, Tribal organizations, and UIOs.

Ranking Member Bruce Westerman (R-AR) acknowledged the disproportionality of the effect of COVID-19 on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations and that the current funding provided in the American Rescue Plan Act is commendable. Still, it is not sustainable for the needs and efficacy of combatting the historical health issues that plague AI/AN people. To reiterate Rep. Westerman's request for increased funding, Rep. Young called for the subcommittee to introduce a historical "Native people only" bill to address funding and all the needs that impact AI/AN populations and Native people.

[Watch Testimony](#) [Read Full Testimony](#)