

PRESS RELEASE: Senate Hearing Highlights Importance of Urban Indian Health as COVID-19 Rages On

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NCUIH President Walter Murillo testified on the critical work of urban Indian health.

Washington, D.C. (April 14, 2021) – Today, the President of the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for an oversight hearing on “Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities: Native Health Systems One Year Later.” Walter Murillo (Choctaw), CEO of Native Health in Phoenix, joined representatives from the Indian Health Service (IHS), National Indian Health Board, Papa Ola Lokahi, and Alaska Native Medical Center for the virtual hearing.

“Because the Indian health care system and UIOs have never been properly funded, we started from an extreme deficit when the pandemic hit,” Murillo said. He continued, “UIOs only receive \$672 per patient for the year - this is unacceptable. The past 12 months have reminded us how resilient our people are and highlighted how critical our Indian health care system is to the lives of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Tragically, we have planned many funerals and lost far too many members of our communities.”

Native health systems “started the rollout of some of the most successful vaccine campaigns in the country, and they continue to work every day to keep native communities safe. It really is remarkable how native health systems have overcome long odds, considering how under-resourced they were to begin,” said Chair Brian Schatz (D-HI) in his opening statement.

Senators from both sides of the aisle emphasized the importance of the federal government’s trust responsibility to provide health care for all Native people and key fixes needed to improve urban Indian health. Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) said, “We need to make sure that Congress is providing sufficient resources directly for the urban Indigenous.” Senator Lankford (R-OK) who championed legislation to extend the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA) to UIOs applauded the [IHS for swift implementation](#) of that provision which passed as a standalone bill last year.

Hot Topic: 100% FMAP for UIOs

Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) pushed for the enactment of a permanent 100% Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) for services provided by Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs). “There’s no reason to distinguish between an IHS, Tribal, or UIO facility. They all should get full 100% FMAP reimbursement. Urban Indian health is suffering, and there is no reason not to give them parity,” said Senator Cantwell. Mr. Murillo, who has been fighting for full FMAP for 20 years, explained how parity would help equalize serious funding shortages experienced by urban Indian organizations.

Hot Topic: Facilities

Infrastructure was another key topic of the hearing discussion with both Senator Smith and Senator Lankford inquiring about restrictions faced by UIOs with regards to facilities upgrades. In his written testimony, Mr. Murillo requested the Committee support \$21 billion for Indian health infrastructure inclusive of UIOs and the support of removing restrictions on UIOs. Senators learned about how UIOs cannot access any infrastructure funds under the IHS facilities line item and the need for the American Jobs Plan to include avenues for improvements for urban Indian health facilities.

Next Steps

The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs will take the recommendations from today into consideration as they prepare their legislative priorities for this Congress related to responding to COVID-19.

More Information

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