

Senator Van Hollen Asks IHS About Challenges for Urban Indians During the Pandemic

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On April 28, 2021, the Senate Committee on Appropriations held a hearing with IHS “Addressing Health Disparities in Indian Country: Review of the Indian Health Service’s COVID Response and Future Needs”. At the hearing Chairman Jeff Merkley and Ranking Member Lisa Murkowski welcomed testimony from Elizabeth Fowler, Acting Director of IHS and Jillian E. Curtis, CFO of the Indian Health Service. The hearing comes as an oversight to COVID-19 and funds appropriated to IHS and its impact in Native communities.

Many committee members expressed concern over IHS data systems and long-term funding needs for AI/AN people and Sen. Van Hollen, Chris [D-MD] focused his questioning to IHS concerning urban Indians. Senator Van Hollen expressed his gratitude to IHS and their collaborative efforts with Native American Lifelines of Baltimore and University of Maryland Baltimore to provide vaccines to urban Indians. Senator Van Hollen expressed concerns on health equity of urban Indians by citing that “urban Indian health on comprises 1% of the IHS budget and has faced chronic underfunding over the years.” Going further Rep. Van Hollen posed the question to Elizabeth Fowler asking for further information about the IHS has faced in supporting urban Native populations during this pandemic. In response, Ms. Fowler explained that some outreach and referral Urban Indian Organizations (UIOs) were not positioned to provide vaccines due to lack of resources including no Electronic Health Record system. Senator Van Hollen’s leadership is well appreciated on behalf the 70% of AI/AN living in urban areas. NCUIH is proud have advocates within Senate who recognize safe, quality, and equitable healthcare, funding is a must for urban Indian health.

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