

Senate Confirms Roselyn Tso as Director of the Indian Health Service

Category: Policy Blog

written by Meredith Raimondi | September 21, 2022

Tso's confirmation comes after almost two years without a permanent IHS Director.

Today, September 21, 2022, Roselyn Tso (Navajo) was confirmed as the Director of the Indian Health Service (IHS) by voice vote in the Senate. Her confirmation comes after 21 months without a permanent IHS Director. Elizabeth Fowler (Comanche) has been serving as the Acting Director of IHS since the resignation of the previous Director, Rear Admiral Michael Weahkee (Zuni), in January 2021. The National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) welcomes Ms. Tso's confirmation and continues to urge for the [elevation of the role to Assistant Secretary](#) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to bring better representation for the health needs of American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs).

"We are thrilled to have a confirmed leader for the Indian Health Service, and we graciously thank Liz Fowler for her tireless service during a pandemic that has been devastating our people. We look forward to working with Roselyn Tso to carry out the mission of IHS in fulfilling the trust responsibility to provide health care equity for all American Indians and Alaska Natives. We continue to work with Congress and this Administration to elevate this position within HHS where it belongs to lift Native voices and improve health outcomes," - Francys Crevier (Algonquin), CEO, NCUIH.

Background

Roselyn Tso

Ms. Tso is a citizen of the Navajo Nation. She [began](#) working for IHS in 1984 and most recently served as the Director of the Navajo Area and Director of the Office of Direct Services and Contracting Tribes until her confirmation. Prior to her work in IHS, much of her professional career was spent in Portland, where she served in several capacities, including working with the three urban programs in the Portland Area that provide services ranging from community health to comprehensive primary health care services. Ms. Tso holds a Bachelor of Arts in interdisciplinary studies and a master's degree in organizational management from Marylhurst University in Portland, Oregon. As the IHS Director, Ms. Tso is responsible for administering a nationwide health care delivery program that is responsible for providing comprehensive health care services to AI/ANs through IHS, Tribes, Tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations (UIOs).

On March 9, 2022, President Biden [announced the nomination](#) of Ms. Tso as Director of IHS. On July 13, 2022, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (SCIA) voted to advance her nomination in a business meeting after she appeared before the Committee for her [nomination hearing](#) on May 25, 2022.

- NCUIH Policy Blast: [Biden Announces Nomination of Roselyn Tso for Director of the Indian Health Service](#)
- NCUIH Policy Update: [Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Advances Nomination of](#)

[Roselyn Tso as Director of IHS, Awaits Full Senate Consideration](#)

SCIA Hearing: Confirmation Needed to Address Health Disparities & Tribal Needs

The absence of a confirmed IHS Director has prevented Tribes, Tribal organizations, and UIOs from addressing the health care needs of their Native American populations, which directly falls under the responsibility of IHS. Since the resignation of Rear Admiral Weahkee, there have been countless requests from Indian Country calling on Congress and the Administration to nominate a new IHS director to address the growing health disparities experienced by AI/ANs. NCUIH has previously [stressed](#) the importance of appointing a permanent IHS Director and called for the elevation of the role to Assistant Secretary.

During the [SCIA hearing](#) to consider her nomination as Director of IHS, Ms. Tso highlighted how Native communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, which has been made worse given the absence of a confirmed Director. She stated, "I am reminded of the many health disparities facing American Indians and Alaskan Natives – health disparities that in many cases were made worse by COVID-19. For example, sadly, today, too many Navajo families still do not have access to running water in their homes. Access to clean, safe drinking water is essential to the health and well-being of our people."

In addition, Ms. Tso stated during the hearing that she intends to utilize IHS resources to not only address the disparities caused by COVID-19, but to also "improve the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health and well-being of all American Indians and Alaskan Natives served by the Agency." To achieve this goal, Ms. Tso said she would prioritize strengthening and streamlining business operations to create a more unified health care system, develop centralized systems to improve patient outcomes, accountability, and transparency, and finally address the needs and challenges experienced by the workforce. To conclude her testimony, Ms. Tso said that if confirmed as the Director of IHS, she would update agency policies and programs, as well as utilize the oversight authority of IHS to best serve each Tribal community.

Today's full Senate consideration for the nomination of Ms. Tso as Director of IHS is the last step in her confirmation process.