

NCUIH Submits Comments to the Indian Health Service on the Creation of an Urban Indian Interagency Workgroup

Category: Policy Blog

written by Sam Sears | October 13, 2022

On September 12, 2022, the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) submitted comments and recommendations to the Indian Health Service (IHS) regarding the formation of an Urban Interagency Workgroup with other federal agencies. The agency held an Urban Confer on July 13, in response to a [letter](#) sent to President Biden and Vice President Harris from several Senators, requesting the formation of such a workgroup. NCUIH supports the development of an Interagency Workgroup and believes that this would be a key step to increasing support and resources to American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) living in urban areas.

NCUIH Recommendations to IHS

NCUIH noted in the comments that Tribes have a unique government-to-government relationship with the federal government and it is essential that any group does not disrupt this. Furthermore, NCUIH supports the federal government in its attempts to better uphold the trust responsibility it has to AI/ANs living in urban areas, which requires more complete involvement of urban Indian organizations (UIOs). However, this does not mean that resources and funding should come at the expense of Tribes. Rather, the government should broaden and deepen the services it provides to all AI/ANs while additionally further meeting the trust responsibility to urban-dwelling AI/ANs.

NCUIH provided the following recommendations to IHS in response to the Urban Confer:

- Respect Tribal Sovereignty and the government-to-government relationship in the formation of an Interagency Workgroup.
- Create a committee within the White House Council on Native American Affairs (WHCNA) focused on how federal agencies can better serve AI/ANs living in urban areas.
 - The White House Council on Native American Affairs (WHCNA) was established to improve outcomes for AI/AN communities through a stronger relationship between the federal government and Native people.
 - Developing an Interagency Oversight Committee on Urban Indian Affairs within WHCNA would allow cross-collaboration across all agencies and ensure that all other WHCNA committees are accurately incorporating urban Indian communities into their work.
- IHS should provide technical assistance to federal agencies to develop Urban Confer policies.
 - Urban Confer policies or UIO-specific consultations do not supplant or otherwise alter Tribal Consultations and the government-to-government relationship between Tribes and federal agencies. IHS should provide support and assistance to federal agencies as they begin the development of such policies.

Background

The formation of an Urban Indian Interagency Work Group to identify the needs and develop strategies to better serve urban AI/AN populations has been a [priority](#) for NCUIH. On February 3,

2022, Senator Van Hollen, along with Senators Alex Padilla (D-CA), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Tina Smith (D-MN), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Ed Markey (D-MA), Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Patty Murray (D-WA), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), and Jon Tester (D-MT) sent a [letter](#) to the Biden Administration requesting the establishment of this workgroup. NCUIH worked closely with Senator Padilla on this letter and supports the effort to bring better representation for the needs of AI/ANs who do not reside on Tribal land.

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee directed IHS to continue to explore the formation of this interagency working group in its [Fiscal Year 2023 Interior Appropriations bill](#), noting that “in addition to the Indian Health Service, the working group should consist of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, U.S. Department of Labor, the Small Business Administration, the Economic Development Agency, FEMA, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and others as identified by UIOs.”

The Work Group would help identify federal funding strategies to better address the needs of urban AI/ANs, advance the development of a wellness-centered framework to inform health services, strengthen support for practice-based traditional healing approaches, improve Urban Confer policies at Health and Human Services and associated agencies, and ensure that Urban Indian Organizations can regularly meet with federal agencies to address relevant topics of concern.

- [Senate Letter on Establishing Urban Indian Interagency Workgroup](#)
- [NCUIH Policy Alert: Padilla, 13 Other Senators Call on Biden Administration to Establish Advisory Group for Urban Indians](#)
- [NCUIH 2022 Policy Priorities](#)

NCUIH will continue to monitor for any further development on the formation of an Urban Interagency Workgroup. NCUIH will also continue to engage with IHS, the White House, and Congress on moving this proposal forward.