

NCUIH Submits Comments to the Department of Veterans Affairs and IHS on VHA-IHS Memorandum of Understanding Operational Plan

Category: Policy Blog

written by Colin Tompson | January 10, 2023

On November 30, 2022, NCUIH submitted comments to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) regarding the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and IHS first-ever Draft Annual Operational Plan for fiscal year (FY) 2022 for the VHA-IHS Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The [MOU](#) establishes a framework for coordination and partnership between VHA and IHS to leverage and share resources and investments in support of each organization's mutual goals. NCUIH believes that the Draft Annual Operational Plan (Operational Plan) can be a significant step forward in implementing the IHS-VHA MOU and ensuring high quality health care for all American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) veterans and continues to work closely with our colleagues at VA and IHS to ensure that Native veterans receive access to the care they earned through their military service, no matter where they live.

Background

AI/AN veterans have [served in the United States military](#) in every armed conflict in the Nation's history and have traditionally served at a higher rate than any other population in the United States. In return for their service, the [United States promised all veterans](#), including Native veterans, "exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being." However, of the [estimated 86.2 percent of AI/AN veterans](#) that live in urban areas, they generally have higher unemployment, lower education attainment, lower income, higher VA-service connected disability, and generally live in poorer housing conditions than non-Native veterans also living in urban areas.

Recommendations

In its comments, NCUIH stressed the importance of the Operational Plan being a vehicle to articulate leadership priorities, provide direction for program management and distribution of resources, engage internal and external partners, and measure the overall progress toward meeting the MOU's goals and objectives. NCUIH's comments emphasized the importance of having OUIHP representation and leadership throughout the plan. As subject matter experts in the health needs of Natives living in urban areas, having representatives who are familiar with UIOs will ensure the needs of urban Native veterans are incorporated into the plan's actions. Additionally, to improve the collaboration between the VA and IHS, and to ensure that care for AI/AN veterans is not disrupted, NCUIH recommended that the Operational Plan has a strategy in place to achieve seamless referrals between the VA and the I/T/U system. NCUIH further stressed the importance of regular consultation with Tribal Governments, Urban Confers with UIOs, and meetings with the HHS Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs. Moreover, because VA data currently indicates that Native veterans use Veterans Benefits Administration benefits or services at lower percentages than other veterans, NCUIH recommended that the Operational Plan add an additional objective be added to increase AI/AN veteran use of VA benefits and services.

NCUIH's work with the VA

NCUIH continues to work on behalf of Native veterans living in urban areas to ensure that they have access to the high-quality, culturally competent care the country owes to them for their military service and as a result of the trust responsibility.

For more information on NCUIH's efforts please visit:

- [President Announces Interagency Initiative to Address Homelessness for Urban Native Veterans](#)
- [Congressional Hearing Showcases Urgency of Stabilizing Indian Health Service Funding for Native Veterans](#)
- [VA Expands Health Care Eligibility for Veterans under the PACT Act, Native Veterans Encouraged to Check Eligibility for Benefits](#)
- [Department of Veterans Affairs Seeking Nominations for IHS Billings Area Committee Member for the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs](#)
- [NCUIH Submits Comments to the Department of Veterans Affairs on a New Medical Residency Pilot Program](#)
- [Department of Veterans Affairs Seeks Comments on Tribal Representation Expansion Project and Designation of Individuals to Represent AI/AN Veterans in VA Benefit Claims](#)
- [MOU Between the VA and IHS Updated to Improve the Health Status of AI/AN Veterans and Include UIOs](#)