NCUIH Signs Letter of Support for John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act

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written by Emily Larsen | February 2, 2024

On November 8, 2023, the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) joined the Nonprofit Infrastructure Coalition, National Urban Indian Family Coalition, and 29 other nonprofit organizations in the effort to support voting rights in the United States, by signing a letter to Representative Terri Sewell (D-AL-07) expressing support for the *John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2023* (H.R 14). This legislation would protect voting rights in the United States and provide critical updates and modernizations to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). Discriminatory voting policies adversely affect Native communities, and this bill would ensure state and local voting enforcements will be subject to increased oversight from the federal government and cannot enforce voting policies that target minority communities.

Background

In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, a landmark piece of legislation that included numerous provisions aimed at ensuring minority voters had an equal opportunity to vote and prohibited racial discrimination in voting. In 2013, the United States Supreme Court in Shelby County v. Holder, overturned many key anti-discrimination provisions in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. One of the key provisions overturned was an enforcement mechanism that prohibited states or political subdivisions, with a history of discriminatory practices, to make changes to voting laws and practices without clearance from federal officials first. In Shelby, the Supreme Court ruled that the formula determining a history of discriminatory voting practices was unconstitutional, removing significant oversight from the federal government.

The *John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* would restore protections in the original Voting Rights Act of 1965 and strengthen legal protections against discriminatory voting practices. **This includes key provisions to protect voting access in Indian Country**, such as prohibiting changing jurisdiction boundaries, creating at-large districts, relocating voting locations, reducing in-person voting days or hours, or making changes to the voter registration list in areas where a single language minority represents 20% or more of the population on Indian lands in the state or political subdivision.

Biden Administration Announces Voter Registration Pilot Program at Indian Health Service Facilities

According to the Native American Voting Rights Coalition an estimated 1,000,000 eligible American Indian and Alaska Native voters are not currently registered to vote, with numerous obstacles preventing them from registering to vote and participating in elections. Some of these include lack of traditional addresses, lack of access to required identification forms, cultural and political isolation, and difficulties reaching the polls.

In an effort to improve voting access for American Indians and Alaska Natives, the Biden Harris Administration has transformed certain Indian Health System facilities into voter registration sites. On March 5, 2023, President Biden announced agency actions to make the voting process more

accessible in alignment with recommendations made by the Native American Rights Fund (NARF). This included a new initiative at the Indian Health Service (IHS) piloting “high-quality voter registration services across five different IHS facilities before the end of 2023”. The first site announced in this initiative Native Health in Phoenix, Arizona.

Native Health has been active in voting rights and dedicated to increasing Native participation in the voting process. In 2022, they distributed Get Out the Vote information at various events, invited guests for voting related discussions on their podcast, Native Talk Arizona, and highlighted the importance of voter registration through social media. As part of this pilot program and being a National Voter Registration Act designated site, they will continue this work by ensuring anyone who steps into their clinic is provided with an opportunity to register to vote.

- NCUIH Blog: Indian Health Service Launches Voter Registration Pilot Program at Indian Health System Sites