

## AI/AN Health Partners

December 7, 2021

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment  
and Related Agencies  
313 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment  
and Related Agencies  
522 Hart Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Merkley and Ranking Member Murkowski:

The AI/AN Health Partners is a coalition of health organizations dedicated to improving health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). AI/ANs face substantial health disparities, and higher mortality and morbidity rates than the general population. The Indian Health Service (IHS) is a critical aspect of how they access health care. However, the IHS must have sufficient resources to meet its mission to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level. We urge you to fund the IHS at the highest amount possible as you work to finalize the fiscal year 2022 Interior Appropriations bill.

As health organizations that provide services for this vulnerable patient population, we thank you for the priority the Subcommittee has given the IHS in the Committee's fiscal year 2022 Interior Appropriations bill. A priority for our organizations has been to increase the professional workforces in facilities run by the IHS and tribal organizations.

The Health Professions account provides loan repayment, the Service's best recruitment tool, for providers who work in Indian country. Health care professionals also need modern equipment to make accurate clinical diagnoses and prescribe effective medical treatments. Therefore, we urge you to recede to the House bill's funding levels of \$92,843,000 for the Indian Health Professions and \$116,640,000 for equipment. Together, these increases will help to recruit and retain more providers in Indian country.

The Administration requested \$284,500,000 for an electronic health record (EHR) system in its fiscal year 2021 budget. The House bill fully funds this request, and we urge you to recede to the House funding level. This will greatly aid health care providers to maintain a continuity of care for AI/AN patients.

We are pleased that the Senate Interior fiscal year 2022 appropriations bill included \$7,679,279,000 for advanced appropriations for the Indian Health Service. Our coalition supports the provision which would provide the Service with two years of appropriations authority at a time rather than one. This

would enable the IHS to augment the value of its funding through long term planning, improved budgeting, and better contracting options. These improvements would benefit patients through better health service delivery and more cost-effective public health programming

The need for the advanced appropriation was addressed in a September 2018 GAO report, “INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE Considerations Related to Providing Advance Appropriation Authority.” IHS officials, tribal representatives, and other stakeholders told the GAO how budget uncertainty resulting from continuing resolutions and government shutdowns can have a variety of effects on the provision of HIS funded health care services for AI/ANs.

Regarding recruitment and retention of health care providers, GAO reported that IHS officials and tribal representatives said that funding uncertainties can exacerbate challenges to staffing health care facilities:

“...when recruiting health care providers, IHS officials said CRs and potential government shutdowns create doubt about the stability of employment at IHS amongst potential candidates, which may result in reduced numbers of candidates or withdrawals from candidates during the pre-employment process. IHS officials said that many providers in rural and remote locations are the sole source of income for their families, and the potential for delays in pay resulting from a government shutdown can serve as a disincentive for employees considering public service in critical shortage areas that do not offer adequate spousal employment opportunities. Tribal representatives said CRs create challenges for tribes in funding planned pay increases—such as cost-of-living adjustments— for health care staff at their facilities, and they may, as a result, defer increases.”

Thank you for considering our requests. We look forward to working with you to improve health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Sincerely yours,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
American Academy of Dermatology Association  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association of Colleges of Nursing  
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
American Dental Association  
American Physical Therapy Association  
American Psychological Association  
Commissioned Officers Association of the USPHS