

Director Abramason: Importance of work in D.C.



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My time during the month of July was filled with a variety of activities. On July 15, I testified before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs. On behalf of the National Indian Health Board and the 566 federally recognized tribes we serve, I submitted testimony specifically addressing H.R. 3229 – Indian Health Service Advance Appropriations Act.

It saddens me when I see our own people write posts on Facebook how they feel our work in D.C. is unimportant and that it's only grant money that we get anyway. It shows me how far we are getting away from who we are and to protect the promises that our ancestors were made so that we may continue to survive.

It came to my attention a long time ago that not only do we have to educate Congress, but we must educate our own. The following are excerpts from my testimony:

“First, I would like to emphasize the importance of the federal trust responsibility, when it comes to the health of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people. The United States assumed this responsibility in a series of treaties with tribes, exchanging compensation and benefits for tribal land and peace. The Snyder Act of 1921 (25 USC 13) legislatively affirmed this trust responsibility. To facilitate upholding its responsibility, the federal government created the Indian Health Service (IHS) and tasked the agency with providing health services to AI/ANs. Since its creation in 1955, IHS has worked toward fulfilling the federal promise to provide health care to Native people.

“In passing the Affordable Care Act, Congress also reauthorized and made permanent the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA). In renewing the IHCIA, Congress reaffirmed the duty of the federal government to American Indians and Alaska Natives, declaring that “it is the policy of this nation, in fulfillment of its special trust responsibilities and legal obligations to Indians — to ensure the highest possible health status for Indians and urban Indians and to provide all resources necessary to effect that policy.”

“Still, American Indians/Alaska Natives have higher death rates in liver disease/cirrhosis, diabetes, unintentional injuries, homicide, suicide, etc. “Sadly, these statistics have become all too familiar in our communities. IHS is currently funded at only 59 percent of total need. In 2013, the IHS per capita

expenditures for patient health services were just \$2,849, compared to \$7,717 per person for health care spending nationally.

“An advance appropriation is funding that becomes available one year or more after the year of the appropriations act in which it is contained. For example, if the FY 2016 advance appropriations for the IHS were included in the FY 2015 appropriations bills, those advance appropriations would not be counted against the FY 2015 funding allocation but rather, against the FY 2016 allocation.

“While H.R. 3229 will not solve the severe lack of funding that the agency experiences, advance appropriations would allow IHS, tribal and urban health programs to effectively and efficiently manage budgets, coordinate care, and improve health quality outcomes for AI/ANs.

“This change in the appropriations schedule creates an opportunity for the federal government to come closer to meeting the trust obligation owed to tribal governments and bring parity to federal health care system by bringing IHS in line with other federal health programs.

“Advance appropriations will allow IHS and tribal health professionals time to plan and tackle many other administrative hurdles, thereby improving access to care. Additionally, it will result in costs savings through lower administrative costs as significant staff time, at all levels, is required each time Congress decides to pass a continuing resolution. Advance appropriations would mean better ability to plan programmatic activity over several years, thereby leading to better health outcomes for AI/AN people and decreased long-term healthcare costs.

“Medicare and Medicaid provide health care to millions of Americans, but these individuals do not have to worry on Sept. 30 of each year if they will be treated on Oct. 1 — because they are considered ‘mandatory spending.’ The VHA provides care through discretionary spending, but still knows its budget a year in advance.

“Despite being founded on contractual treaty obligations and federal law, the requirement to fund the IHS is still discretionary. Our people must still wait on the whims of Congress before they can know if their health care is funded. Advance appropriations will be one important step forward toward improving the health of AI/ANs.”

If you are interested in reading the entire testimony, please contact Jennifer Dale-Burton at our Communications Department.

Have we accomplished anything by going to D.C.? Absolutely! We (and I do mean Chairperson Payment) have established many contacts and developed excellent working relationships congressional staff and the congressmen and congresswomen themselves. We work on the Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee. This is a committee made up of tribal leaders across the country. We meet quarterly with the top administrators of the Health and Human Resource

Department. We have had meetings with the president. Does this help our tribe? Absolutely! Our contract support dollars owed to us will soon be here. We have received more healthcare funding. Our Bemidji area and Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians is on the map. More national conferences have been in our area. We are able to tell our stories about the health of our people. So many things that I could go on and on. We could not do these things without the support of our tribal board. Thank you for that!

I participated in the Sault Tribe Golf Scholarship tournament and I must say it was the best one ever despite the

quick downpour! We raised over \$80,000 and money is still coming in. That's more than we have raised in years. A big *chi-miigwech* goes to the tournament fundraising team of Jessica Dumback, Tamara Leask, Jeff Holt and Jake Sillers, not to mention all the volunteers that day. You all did awesome and I'm still eating my M&Ms.

I attended Trever and Becky Mills wedding reception at our DreamMakers Theater this past Saturday. It was so beautifully decorated! The wait staff served over 350 plated dinners. They did an awesome job! I was so proud of them! What a wonderful family party it was! I would highly

recommend this place to anyone!

Our new board has been meeting a lot in regards to management, budgets, communications, planning and development. I am going to recommend that our Unit I board members meet on a regular basis to discuss our unit's areas of concerns and solutions we may bring.

There are many more challenges ahead of us. The economy is down, which in turn means the casino is down. We were told last week that we will not meet our covenants with the bank and we will have to pay a large fine. Changes are in the air. If you can believe it, we need to do more with less.