

# National Indian Health Board



## 2023 Legislative and Policy Agenda for Indian Health

The NIHB Board of Directors set forth the *2023 National Indian Health Board (NIHB) Legislative and Policy Agenda* to advance the organization's mission and vision. This agenda provides a blueprint for ensuring that all American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people and communities can achieve the highest level of health and well-being. The *2023 Legislative and Policy Agenda* guides the work of NIHB as we strive to identify and advance national Tribal health priorities. Our objectives are to educate policymakers about Tribal priorities, advocate for and secure resources, build Tribal health and public health capacity, and support Tribally led efforts to strengthen Tribal health and public health systems. Our goal is to ensure that AI/ANs receive the health care and public health services necessary to achieve the best possible health outcomes.

### **I. TREATIES, TRUST, AND THE GOVERNMENT-TO-GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP**

To strengthen Tribal sovereignty and the government-to-government relationship, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

#### ***A. Ensure the Development and Implementation of Meaningful, Robust, and Tribally Driven Tribal Consultation Policies***

Tribal consultation is a necessary part of the federal trust responsibility. To honor Tribal sovereignty, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and its operating divisions must consult with Tribal leaders to develop and implement Tribal consultation policies that are meaningful, thorough, and consistent across the Department.

#### ***B. Support and Strengthen the White House Council on Native American Affairs***

The White House Council on Native American Affairs and the annual White House Tribal Leaders Summit are critical opportunities for the heads of governments to come together, share concerns, generate ideas and solutions, negotiate their roles and responsibilities, and agree on a course of action. However, there must be greater engagement with Tribal leaders to facilitate meaningful dialogue and input. Continuity and distinct points of contact are necessary for meaningful and consistent improvement in the government-to-government relationship and trust responsibility. NIHB will advocate for greater transparency and accountability.

#### ***C. Elevate the IHS Director to Assistant Secretary for Indian Health***

The Indian Health Service (IHS), within the HHS, is the principal federal entity charged with fulfilling the federal trust responsibility for Indian health care. Elevating the IHS Director to an Assistant Secretary for Indian Health would raise the priority and presence of Indian health matters.

#### ***D. Increase Tribal Representation in All HHS Operating Divisions and Appoint a Senior Advisor to the Secretary of HHS***

The fulfillment of the trust responsibility requires Indian Country to inform the decisions of each operating division within the HHS. This representation also includes appointing officials with extensive federal Indian law and policy background in the Secretary's office and Department agencies. Inadequate representation creates a disconnect between the agencies and Indian Country, resulting in ineffective policies, delayed delivery of services, and inattention to critical Tribal priorities.

# National Indian Health Board



## ***E. Expand and Strengthen Tribal Self-Governance Throughout HHS***

Tribal self-determination and self-governance honor and affirm inherent Tribal sovereignty. A self-governance program model promotes efficiency, accountability, and best practices in managing Tribal programs and administering federal funds at the Tribal level. Because Tribes can tailor programs according to the communities' needs, self-governance results in more responsive and effective programs. The *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act* (ISDEAA) provides the mechanisms to achieve this. However, ISDEAA is not applied to all IHS programs or applicable throughout the HHS. Additional legislation and administrative action are needed to expand and strengthen Tribal self-determination and self-governance in HHS healthcare-related programs. NIHB supports the introduction of legislation establishing a demonstration project to implement Title VI of ISDEAA across HHS. NIHB will advocate with HHS officials to support and provide technical assistance to implement self-governance Department-wide

## ***F. Establish Interagency Agreements Between HHS Operating Divisions and IHS***

In absence of the expansion of self-governance and non-competitive, direct funding, IHS and other HHS operating divisions should establish interagency agreements to ensure that there is a mechanism for distributing funding directly to Tribes equitably and expediently.

## ***G. Expand Technical Assistance Support to Tribal Advisory Committees***

Tribal Advisory Committees (TACs) and Tribal technical assistance (TA) from national, regional, and intertribal organizations can be essential in the consultation process. While these entities are not a substitute for Tribal consultation, TACs play an indispensable role in government-to-government relationships. However, narrow interpretations of the [Unfunded Mandates Reform Act's \(UMRA\) Federal Advisory Committee Act \(FACA\)](#) exemption have prevented effective communication and collaboration between federal agencies and Tribal leaders. Therefore, Congress and the Administration must act to expand the UMRA exemption to allow Tribal leaders serving on TACs to freely utilize, without limitations, technical and subject matter experts in the execution of their duties. Additionally, HHS and its operating divisions must support and resource the work of Tribal organizations, such as NIHB, which are the Tribes' chosen, vital link to ensuring that Tribal leaders have access to the subject matter expertise that helps them prepare to provide meaningful feedback to or engage proactively with Federal or Administration Personnel.

## **II. EQUITABLE AND COMPREHENSIVE FUNDING**

To ensure Indian health receives equitable and comprehensive funding, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

### ***A. Establish a Tribally Driven process to determine Full Funding for Indian health***

The full funding level deserves a thoughtful, measured, and Tribally driven approach to developing appropriate recommendations. The four walls of the IHS budget formulation work are systemically limited to current conventions of need based on IHS and subsequent Health Delivery systems which include geographic limitations. The true need easily far exceeds current estimates. NIHB will work to secure funding to facilitate a nationwide and Tribally driven process in collaboration with HHS and OMB, to determine the true funding level required to fully support Indian health care service delivery.

### ***B. Phase in Full Funding and Mandatory Appropriations for Indian Health***

Through its coerced acquisition of land and resources, and genocide destruction of cultures and peoples the United States formed a fiduciary relationship with Tribal nations whereby it has created a trust relationship

# National Indian Health Board



to safeguard Tribal rights, lands, and resources. As part of this coerced exchange, Congress has continuously reaffirmed its duty to provide for Indian health care. Unfortunately, Tribal nations face an ongoing health crisis that is a direct result of the United States' chronic underfunding of Indian health care for decades. This contributes to ongoing health and persistent inequities and disparities. Mandatory appropriations for the IHS are consistent with the trust responsibility and treaty obligations reaffirmed by the United States in the *Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCA)*. Even today, many provisions of IHCA remain unfunded and without implementation.

## ***C. Protect and Expand Advance Appropriations for Indian Health***

Advance appropriations for the IHS marks a historic paradigm shift in the nation-to-nation relationship between Tribal nations and the United States. With advance appropriations, AI/ANs will no longer be uniquely at risk of death or serious harm caused by delays in the annual appropriations process. However, the inclusion of advance appropriations each year is not guaranteed, and the solution in the FY 2023 Omnibus is far from perfect. NIHB will work to promote the smooth implementation of this policy and ensure that IHS advance appropriations are expanded and included each year, as we continue to collaborate with Tribal leadership for the advancement of mandatory direct appropriations for the Indian Health Service. We support expanding IHS advance appropriations to all areas of the IHS budget and including increases from year to year that adjust for inflation, population growth, and necessary program increases. NIHB supports advance appropriations until full, mandatory appropriations are achieved.

## ***D. Establish a 10% Set-Aside, Non-competitive, Direct Funding for Tribes in all available HHS Operating Divisions and Funding Streams***

Since the trust responsibility extends to all agencies within the HHS, funding from these agencies should be dedicated and directed to Tribal nations. The existing framework forces Tribes to compete for these funds, pitting them against states and local governments with greater grant-writing capacity. As a result, Tribes regularly lose out on funding. Direct funding eliminates the administrative burden imposed by the grant process for both agencies and Tribes. Therefore, agencies should use all available authorities to create Tribal set-aside funding and work with Congress to establish set-aside funding in the annual appropriations for each HHS operating division.

## ***E. Eliminate Federal Match Requirements for all Federal Programs Serving Indian Country***

Too often, federal grant programs require match requirements by the local government or receiving entity. This is not only often a financial burden that puts these necessary dollars out of reach for many Tribal communities, but it is a direct violation of the federal trust responsibility to Tribal nations. Instead, Congress should eliminate federal matching requirements for Tribes in all federal programs.

## ***F. In Coordination with Tribal Nations, Enact and Implement a “Marshall Plan” for Tribal Nations***

Over time, the United States has impeded Tribal sovereignty and taken Tribal homelands and resources to generate its land base, wealth, and strength. Through these takings, the United States has assumed unique trust and treaty obligations to Tribal nations and Native people. However, it has consistently failed to live up to these obligations. Much like the U.S. investment in the rebuilding of European nations following World War II via the Marshall Plan, the legislative and executive branches should commit to the same level of responsibility to assist in the rebuilding of Tribal nations. Current conditions in Indian Country are, in large part, directly attributable to the shameful acts and policies of the United States. NIHB extends its support to a Marshall Plan for Tribal nations.

# National Indian Health Board



## **III. INNOVATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE**

To build an innovative and sustainable infrastructure to support Indian health, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

### ***A. Support the Tribal Water and Sanitation Infrastructure Investments***

Water is the foundation of all life on Earth and its preservation is essential to human survival. Human health depends on safe water, sanitation, and hygienic conditions. The *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)*, enacted in November 2021, provided \$3.5 billion for the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction program to address the known sanitation deficiencies in Tribal communities. The implementation and any evolving or additional costs (such as operations and maintenance) will need to be monitored and addressed appropriately in subsequent annual budget requests. Congress should also address untenable limitations on the administrative caps outlined in the IIJA that make it impossible to implement in many areas of Indian Country.

### ***B. Prioritize Support for Health Care Facilities Construction***

The Indian health system is beset by antiquated and deficient health care facilities that are largely unequipped to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other health crises. There is significant concern that the Indian health system cannot respond to these crises without fully funding the health care facility construction. Additionally, multiple regions do not have any IHS hospitals. NIHB will work to establish the resources and authorities to construct facilities for all IHS Areas. IHS and Tribes need equitable and flexible funding to increase hospital and clinic capacity and related costs such as maintenance, improvement, and equipment. Funding must also be available to construct and maintain public health facilities.

### ***C. Modernize Health Information Technology in Indian Country***

The IHS Resource and Patient Management System (RPMS) is outdated and poses significant interoperability issues. Due to increasing interoperability issues and failure to meet the needs of many Tribal health systems, many Tribes, at their own expense, have moved away from the outdated RPMS to better, more interoperable systems. IHS leadership concluded that a full replacement of RPMS is the most appropriate, realistic, and sustainable option for IHS HIT modernization, and are actively planning on purchasing a new electronic health record (EHR). However, funding is insufficient to adequately create the efficiencies required to overhaul and operate a modern EHR system. NIHB will advocate for broad-based funding to Tribes and Tribal organizations for EHR replacement, including reimbursing Tribes and Tribal organizations that have invested their dollars in a modern EHR.

### ***D. Increase Access to Reliable High-Speed Internet***

The expansion of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance of broadband as a public health issue; however, the lack of broadband access presents multiple barriers for Tribes. While Congress has provided significant resources for tribal broadband in recent years, the applications to access these funds far exceeded the amount provided. This digital divide illuminates Tribes' inability to provide or fully realize the benefits of telehealth. In addition to public health implications, the lack of broadband access presents a barrier to economic development, particularly detrimental in an era where remote work has been necessary and will continue to be more widely adopted.

# National Indian Health Board



## **IV. PROMOTE HEALTH EQUITY IN INDIAN COUNTRY**

To address chronic health disparities and promote health equity in Indian Country, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

### ***A. Elevate a Tribal Perspective in Federal Health Equity Plans and Initiatives***

Effective efforts for health equity in Indian Country must approach health equity plans through the lens of Tribal sovereignty, the nation-to-nation relationship, and the federal trust responsibility. In addition, these plans must conceptualize this work around an understanding of AI/ANs as a group with a unique political status, not as a racial minority. Health programs and initiatives need to prioritize Tribal self-determination and supporting connection to community and culture. Tribes know their people, communities, social and historical context, needs, and strengths best – Tribes are the experts in charting a path to health equity for their people. In addition, achieving health equity requires recognizing and rectifying historical injustices and providing resources according to need. NIHB will advocate that any health equity work will incorporate these principles.

### ***B. Create and Invest in an Indigenous Model of Social and Structural Determinants of Health***

Decades of research have documented health inequities experienced by AI/ANs and the powerful role played by underlying social and structural determinants of health. However, these determinants that drive health inequities for AI/ANs are often distinct and require a unique perspective and customized approach to address. Current research on social determinants of health is missing this Indigenous perspective. Health equity for AI/ANs will advance with a Tribally created Indigenous model of social and structural determinants of health that will identify root causes of inequities and priorities for intervention. Investing in these priorities will then pave a path forward to achieving health equity.

### ***C. Improve Federal Standards for Data Collection and Reporting to Improve AI/AN Visibility and Better Measure Health Inequities***

High-quality, meaningful AI/AN health data is essential for identifying disparities, setting priorities, designing strategies, and highlighting successes related to health equity. However, racial misclassification, missing data, and other quality issues continue to impede the representation of AI/ANs in many data sets. With AI/AN people and communities so often missing from the data, this becomes one more form of erasure of American Indians and Alaska Natives – our experiences are not represented, our needs are not heard, and our very existence becomes invisible. In addition, the way federal data is reported often excludes the many AI/ANs who identify as Hispanic or with multiple racial identities. Reframing the data away from a focus on race and instead focusing on “AI/AN” as a political status is a more effective, empowering, strengths-based approach that supports Tribal self-determination. NIHB will advocate for improved data practices as a crucially important step to undo the centuries of AI/AN erasure contributing to the ongoing health inequities in Tribal communities.

### ***D. Promote and Sustain Environmental Health Improvements in Indian Country***

The health of the environment directly impacts public health in Indian Country. Improving environmental health aid in preventing illness, disease, and general well-being. Contaminated drinking water, harmful air pollutants, destruction of natural habitats, climate change, extreme weather, and exposure to toxic heavy metals are issues that Tribal communities struggle to prevent, often with little or no support from the federal government. NIHB will advocate for environmental justice policies and funding to address these issues.

### ***E. Address Housing and Homelessness in Indian Country***

# National Indian Health Board



Housing is a social determinant of health, and all Tribal members should have access to stable, safe, sanitary, and affordable housing. Tribal housing issues and challenges exacerbate the health disparities and lower health status experienced by AI/AN communities. NIHB will continue to support the reauthorization of the *Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1996* (NAHASDA) and advocate for additional resources for Tribal housing needs.

## ***F. Identify, Enact, and Resource Solutions for the Crisis of Missing & Murdered Indigenous People***

Over the past decade, the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) has gained renewed national attention. The crisis has been ongoing for decades, and the situation remains severe. The violence involved in MMIP is a significant public health concern where discussions of violence prevention efforts touch upon intimate partner violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and sexual violence. However, addressing the MMIP crisis also presents its own unique set of additional challenges because of the sheer scope of the crisis and its required engagement across multiple professional disciplines and different legal jurisdictions. NIHB will continue to advocate for solutions and support resources for MMIP.

## ***G. Establish Permanency, Increased Funding, and Self-governance authority for the Special Diabetes Program for Indians***

Congress established the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI) in 1997 to address the disproportionate impact of type 2 diabetes in AI/AN communities. This program has grown and become our nation's most strategic and effective federal initiative to combat diabetes in Indian Country. NIHB will advocate for the permanent reauthorization of SDPI at a minimum of \$250 million annually, with automatic annual funding increases matched to the rate of medical inflation. Additionally, NIHB will continue to support Tribal priorities, which include amending SDPI's authorizing statute, the Public Health Service Act, to permit Tribes and Tribal organizations to receive SDPI funds through self-determination and self-governance contracts and compacts and advocating for IHS programs, including SDPI, to be protected from mandatory sequestration. Congress must also repay funds taken from SDPI through mandatory sequestration thus far.

## ***H. Support the Native Farm Bill Coalition's policy priorities when it comes to nutrition programs for Indian Country***

In 2023, Congress will update and modernize the 2018 Farm Bill. This legislation contains many critical nutrition programs that are necessary for improving the health of AI/ANs. NIHB will support the request of the Native Farm Bill coalition to expand and improve these programs, by supporting Tribal sovereignty and self-determination and increasing flexibility for Tribal communities for these programs. NIHB will support increasing the use of native and traditional foods as a matter of healing and health.

## ***I. Address the Maternal Health Crisis in Indian Country***

AI/AN women are experiencing an alarming rate of maternal mortality: they are three to four times more likely than white women to die of complications related to pregnancy and/or childbirth. Moreover, AI/AN women experience a higher rate of severe maternal morbidity. Adverse maternal health outcomes are, in part, due to the historical trauma of systemic racism, colonization, genocide, forced migration, reproductive coercion and cultural erasure. To address this crisis, NIHB will advocate for adequate and appropriate funding for IHS and expanded access to maternal health coverage for AI/AN women. Additionally, NIHB will work to develop deeper knowledge about AI/AN women's maternal health outcomes through strategic collaborations and will support federal policies that are responsive to the needs of AI/AN women.

## **V. TRIBAL BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**

# National Indian Health Board



Any policies or initiatives designed to improve Tribal behavioral health must be grounded in culture, tradition, language and native ways of knowing. To that end, in order to reduce AI/AN behavioral health inequity and improve health outcomes, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

## ***A. Address Historical and Intergenerational Trauma***

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are among the many health problems worsened by discrimination and oppression, both historical and current. Research has directly linked historical trauma to substance use among AI/AN peoples. Additionally, the detrimental, intergenerational harm from boarding school policies is associated with increased SUDs, mental illness, and numerous chronic health conditions. As we examine our past, we must continue to look toward the future to identify and address these policies' impact on our communities. The federal government must support the development of priorities that include both evidence-based practices and culturally respectful practice-based evidence to support healing for Tribal members. NIHB will advance Tribal and federal strategic efforts and programs to provide existing pathways to build or expand strategies that more effectively address healing from trauma.

## ***B. Promote Culturally Centered and Tribally Driven Behavioral Health Policy and Programs***

AI/AN cultures serve as key protective factors and primary prevention of many mental health and substance use disorders. Historically, traditional healing and culturally centered ways of living provided holistic mental wellness. Forced assimilation policies and programs harmed Tribes and created behavioral health disparities and negative health outcomes. Just as federal policy and programs once sought to eradicate AI/AN identity, there must be an equally vigorous contemporary response that assists in reconnection and revitalization of identity. NIHB will work to advance funding and provision for culturally centered and Tribally driven behavioral health policies and programs that protect identity and promote holistic mental wellness.

## ***C. Strengthen Tribal Behavioral Health Systems***

Many barriers impact access, quality, and availability of health, behavioral health, and related services for AI/AN people. These issues include provider and personnel shortages, limited resources, and obtaining services without traveling great distances. Additionally, there are concerns related to funding, such as amounts, distribution mechanisms, allocations, sufficiency, and reporting requirements. NIHB will continue to advocate for adequate resources to address the chronic behavioral health needs of Indian Country.

## ***D. Advance Comprehensive Tribal Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services to address the opioid and Suicide Crises in Indian Country,***

The lived experiences of AI/AN historical trauma and adversity have contemporary descriptions and diagnoses: adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders (SUDs), and suicidal ideation—all of which have accompanying strategies for prevention, treatment, and recovery. Following an intervention, services should provide ongoing, comprehensive support for treatment, recovery, and prevention and an established continuum of care. NIHB will work to strengthen and assess the availability of critical services, gaps in services, and opportunities for improvement to meet community needs.

## **VI. SUPPORT EMPOWERED & CULTURALLY INFORMED HEALTH WORKFORCE**

To address the chronic Tribal health workforce shortages, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

# National Indian Health Board



## ***A. Ensure a Sustainable and Culturally Informed Tribal Health Care Workforce***

The IHS and Tribal health care providers continue to struggle to find qualified medical professionals to work in facilities serving Indian Country. To strengthen the health care workforce, IHS and Tribal programs need investment from the federal government to educate, recruit, and expand the pool of qualified medical professionals.

## ***B. Support and Expand the Community Health Aide Program (CHAP) and the Dental Health Aide (DHAT) Program***

Since the 1960s, the Community Health Aide Program (CHAP) has empowered frontline medical, behavioral, and dental providers to serve Alaska Native communities, successfully expanding access in these communities to urgently needed health and dental services. CHAP is now a crucial pathway for AI/AN peoples to become health care providers. The IHCA authorized the IHS to expand the CHAP to Tribes outside Alaska. Based on the IHCA and the CHAP's success in Alaska, IHS developed CHAP expansion policies from 2016 to 2020. NIHB will continue to advance the Tribal priorities for CHAP and DHAT. NIHB will advocate for swift implementation of the CHAP program nationally.

## ***C. Develop an Empowered and Culturally Informed Public Health Workforce***

Workforce is a core component of public health service delivery. Public health employees are integral in delivering critical public health services and activities within Tribal communities. However, the makeup of the public health workforce in Tribal communities is widely variable as Tribes do not always have designated "public health" staff (e.g., staff hired solely to provide public health services). For many Tribes, significant overlap exists between their health care and public health systems, with some essential staff bridging both functions. Tribal communities need an empowered health workforce that understands and celebrates the unique cultural elements of Tribal communities. Educational and training programs must invest in increasing the number of AI/AN people in the pipeline and must include AI/AN people in the creation of educational curricula.

## ***D. Invest in Graduate Medical Education staffing and Infrastructure in Indian Country***

*GME Program.* The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Graduate Medical Education (GME) Program prepares residents to provide high-quality care, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Few GME programs are located in rural AI/AN communities. Most Teaching Health Centers are in Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), Rural Health Clinics, and Tribal health centers, all of which are important to creating a sustainable health workforce in Indian Country. There remains room for continued improvement in creating opportunities and incentives for medical students to work in Tribal communities, for example, by conditioning receipt of GME funds on placement in Tribal communities or by creating a separate Tribal GME program altogether. These measures would enlarge the Tribal health workforce and create a more sustainable model for recruiting providers.

## **VII. INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY HEALTH CARE**

To increase access to quality health care for AI/AN people, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

### ***A. Remove Barriers that Inhibit the Integration of Traditional Practices***

Recognizing Tribal sovereignty means recognizing the sovereign right of Tribal nations to utilize traditional practices to provide for the health of their people. Traditional medicine is central to many Tribal cultures

# National Indian Health Board



and effectively treats many chronic health issues faced by AI/AN people. Despite its effectiveness and existence from time immemorial, traditional practices are still blocked from inclusion in contemporary health care delivery. NIHB will advocate for funding of traditional health practices, including reimbursement through programs at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and private insurance. NIHB will also support the restoration of traditional healers under the Federal Tort Claims Act.

## ***B. Protect Access and Improve Health Services for Native Veterans***

The United States has a dual responsibility to Native veterans: one obligation specific to their political status as members of federally recognized Tribes and another specific to their service in the Armed Services of the United States. Despite the bravery, sacrifice, and steadfast commitment to protecting the sovereignty of Tribal nations and the entire United States, Native veterans continue to experience some of the worst health outcomes and face the greatest challenges to receiving quality health services among all Americans. Specifically, NIHB advocate for VA to adequately implement laws that have already been passed to support Native veterans with regard to co-pay elimination and purchased/referred care reimbursement. NIHB will also work to ensure that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) work seamlessly with IHS, and Tribal health programs. NIHB will support other recommendations of the VA TAC.

## ***C. Strengthen the Role of Medicaid in AI/AN Healthcare***

Medicaid plays an integral role in ensuring access to health services for AI/AN peoples and provides essential funding support for the Indian health system overall through third-party revenues. In fact, in many places across Indian Country, reimbursements from Medicaid have enabled Indian health facilities to provide medical services previously unfunded by the annual appropriations. NIHB will advance this priority by supporting Tribal priorities for CMS programs.

## ***D. Increase Access and Financial Support for Indian Health Through Medicare and Support CMS TTAG Priorities***

Medicare plays an essential role in the Indian health system by providing additional coverage for AI/ANs who are elderly or have specific disabilities. Reimbursements from Medicare serve as a critically important funding source for Indian health providers and have enabled the expansion of services in many areas. Because of this, strengthening and expanding Medicare reimbursements for services can protect the financial health of the Indian health system. NIHB will advance this priority by supporting Tribal priorities for CMS programs.

## **VIII. STRENGTHEN TRIBAL PUBLIC HEALTH CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

To strengthen Tribal public health capacity and infrastructure, the NIHB will pursue the following priorities:

### ***A. Strengthen Tribal Public Health Agencies and Authority***

The [2019 Public Health in Indian Country Capacity Scan](#) (PHICCS) highlighted gaps in public health planning, assessment, quality improvement activities; accreditation; and Tribal law as a public health tool. Future efforts in public health infrastructure should focus on building capacity at a local level. With sufficient investment and complete Tribal control, Tribes can adapt their public health infrastructure to meet the unique needs of their people and circumstances. This will lead to innovation and advances that will protect public health for AI/AN peoples for decades to come. NIHB will advocate for broad-based funding for Tribes and Tribal organizations to support public health infrastructure.

# National Indian Health Board



## ***B. Expand Surveillance and Epidemiology Capabilities***

The PHICCS report cited surveillance and epidemiology capacity as an area where Tribal health organizations lag significantly behind their state/local counterparts. Having accurate, real-time data is necessary for Tribal public health officials to determine where the needs are. While the Tribal Epidemiology Centers (TECs), supported by the IHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have helped address this data gap and build public health capacity to promote health and prevent disease in AI/AN communities, Tribes still cite the need for increased data capacity and support. Additionally, NIHB will call upon federal agencies to follow current law around this authority.

## ***C. Invest in Tribal Health Research Capacity***

More community-based participatory research (CBPR) is needed to understand the causes, impacts, and interventions required related to the significant health inequities experienced by AI/AN people. However, AI/AN communities are often overlooked and not represented in research studies. Significant gaps remain in representation and resources for AI/AN health research and appropriate procedures for non-Native researchers to partner with Tribes. When considering current and future CBPR endeavors, inclusion, sovereignty, cultural appropriateness, and Tribal research capacity remain areas of concern for Tribes. More investment is also needed to train the next generation of AI/AN health researchers. NIHB will advocate for federal funding, to allow Tribes to build research capacity, strengthen infrastructure, support traditional practices, and protect sovereignty. NIHB will support Tribal capacity to secure research funding and provide training and technical assistance (TA) to Tribes, including information on NIH subdivisions, projects, and processes.

## ***D. Improve COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery Efforts and Address Impacts of Long COVID***

Despite alarming gaps in population-specific COVID-19 health disparities data, available information demonstrates that Tribal communities faced a disproportionate burden from the COVID-19 public health crisis. The Indian health system needs the tools necessary to address the disparities and underlying conditions. Moreover, as more research is being conducted on the impacts of Long COVID, Indian Country needs tools and resources to respond to and address these impacts as they arise.

## ***E. Expand Emergency Preparedness and Response Capabilities in Indian Country***

Planning for, responding to, and recovering from manufactured or natural disasters and emergencies in Tribal communities can pose unique challenges including a lack of resources, the complexity around jurisdiction, and a lack of understanding among partners working with Tribes. Furthermore, many Tribal nations are in rural or isolated areas, making them the first or only responders to emergencies or manufactured or natural disasters. Increased direct and non-competitive funding is needed to assist Tribes in increasing their emergency preparedness capacity to plan for, respond to, and recover from disasters and emergencies in Tribal communities.

## ***F. Support Tribal Funding for Climate Resilience, Climate Adaptation, First Responders Training, and Community Education.***

Tribal communities are face unprecedented threats from the impacts of climate change and other environmental threats. This crisis places significant strain on vulnerable Tribal communities. Due to climate and related environmental threats such as flooding, erosion, ocean acidification, increased wildfires, extended drought, and changes in seasons, Tribal homelands, and traditional ways of life are in jeopardy. This impacts not only the places Tribal communities live, but food, sustenance and our very own way of

# National Indian Health Board



life. NIHB will advocate for additional resources and reduced administrative barriers to preparing for and adapting to climate change and other environmental threats.

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