

National Indian Health Board



June 15, 2016

The Honorable Kristi Noem
United States House of Representatives
2422 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

**Re: Helping Ensure Accountability, Leadership, and Trust in Tribal Healthcare
(HEALTTH) Act (H.R. 5406)**

Dear Representative Noem,

On behalf of the National Indian Health Board (NIHB)¹, I write to offer support of H.R. 5406, the Helping Ensure Accountability, Leadership, and Trust in Tribal Healthcare (HEALTTH) Act. The provisions within this bill that seek to provide greater accountability, transparency, and address other medical and administrative challenges within the Indian Health Service (IHS), are necessary and timely to improve the health of all American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs).

The National Indian Health Board is a non-profit organization that serves all 567 federally recognized in regards to healthcare and public health programs and policy. It is our mission to be the **one voice** affirming and empowering American Indian and Alaska Native peoples to protect and improve health and reduce the health disparities our people face.

As you know, longstanding and systemic issues within the IHS have led to crisis situations in the Great Plains Service Area (Area). This Area has 19 Indian Health Service Units and Tribal managed Service Units that provide healthcare to approximately 122,000 AI/ANs residing in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa. In the last year, several hospitals in this region have lost, (or received threats of revocation) their ability to bill Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) due to the failure of federally run sites to comply with basic safety and regulatory procedures.

¹ Established in 1972, the NIHB is an inter-Tribal organization that advocates on behalf of Tribal governments for the provision of quality health care to all AI/AN. The NIHB is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of a representative from each of the twelve Indian Health Service (IHS) Areas. Each Area Health Board elects a representative to sit on the NIHB Board of Directors. In areas where there is no Area Health Board, Tribal governments choose a representative who communicates policy information and concerns of the Tribes in that area with the NIHB. Whether Tribes operate their entire health care program through contracts or compacts with IHS under Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA), or continue to also rely on IHS for delivery of some, or even most, of their health care, the NIHB is their advocate.

While reforms may have started in response to the issues in the Great Plains Area; the HEALTTH Act truly seeks to implement changes needed nationally to the entire Indian Health Service, so that all Tribes and Tribal citizens receiving healthcare from IHS are assured safe, reliable and quality health service.

The NIHB applauds the efforts of the HEALTTH Act to begin to rectify the issues regarding quality and access to care for AI/ANs who rely on IHS. The spirit and intent of this legislation is clearly aimed at responding to the call of Tribal leaders, patients and the families of those who have had adverse experiences within the IHS system. Significant systemic changes are needed and this bill boldly makes a first attempt to open the dialogue of change. We stand ready to work with Congress as the bill is shaped and formed through a Tribally-engaged and informed process.

When Congress renewed the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA), it was legislatively affirmed that, *“it is the policy of this Nation, to ensure the highest possible health status for Indians ... and to **provide all resources necessary to effect that policy.**”*² As H.R. 5406 seeks to amend the IHCIA, we look forward to this opportunity for greater reflection, consideration and implementation to ensure IHCIA achieves its full potential to assure the highest possible health status for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Thank you for your continued concern for the health of Indian Country.

Yours in health,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lester Secatero', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lester Secatero

² Indian Health Care Improvement Act, §103(2009).