

Opening Statement
Chairman Ben Nighthorse Campbell
Committee on Indian Affairs
July 22, 1998 Legislative Hearing on S. 1770
“A bill to elevate the position of Director of the Indian Health Service”

Today, in a joint hearing with the House Resources Committee, the Committee will receive testimony on S. 1770, a bill to create an Office of Indian Health within the Department of Health and Human Services and elevate the position of the Director to that of an Assistant Secretary. As a co-sponsor of this bill, I believe that these changes are needed to ensure that critical policy and budgetary decisions will be made with the full involvement and consultation of the Indian Health Service.

Currently, virtually every funding and policy decision that impacts American Indian health care is made at the highest administrative levels within HHS and OMB without the direct participation of the IHS Director. Ironically, this is done within an Administration that proclaims its support for a government to government relationship and consultation process with American Indian tribes.

Just this past May, the President signed an executive order mandating consultation with the tribes prior to federal actions being undertaken. Many tribes simply do not believe that this Administration is keeping its promise to them regarding health care.

Unlike other Public Health Service agencies who work with states or other local agencies, the IHS is the lead agency charged with the federal obligation for the direct delivery of health care service to Indian people. The IHS has historically struggled with inadequate funding, resources or administrative support.

We all know the horrible litany of statistics, but what we do not know is the “why.” Why does the American Indian population continue to suffer the worst rates of disease, infant mortality, suicide, child abuse, and other problems? Why, in light of these facts, does the federal government consistently under fund and even reduce IHS programs? Why, in a country with vast wealth and resources, are there such glaring health care disparities between Native Americans and other Americans? Perhaps we will never know the answers, but we should continue to ask the questions and find ways to change this terrible legacy.

This bill is not about controversial policy decisions. This bill is about how to fulfill a fundamental trust obligation by the federal government to the Indian tribes and their members to provide quality health care. Quality health care was part and parcel of the peace and protection promised by the United States when the treaties were signed, and through statutes and court decisions, remains the law of the land.

S. 1770 will direct the Administration to include the IHS when making those critical decisions that can often mean life or death for many Indian people whether they live on or off

their reservations.

Today is the day we move forward with legislation that will open pathways to the federal government and Indian tribes to work together to find practical solutions to providing quality health care services to the tribal populations in this country.

I thank Senator McCain for this leadership on this issue and look forward to getting this bill passed this year. The time has come.