

National Indian Health Board



October 28, 2019

The Honorable Tom Udall
United States Senate SH-531
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Support for the Indian Health Service Health Professions Tax Fairness Act of 2019

Dear Senator Udall,

I write today to express my strong support for the Indian Health Service (IHS) Health Professions Tax Fairness Act of 2019. As you know, the Indian health system faces significant challenges in recruitment and retention of quality health providers. This legislation will help ensure that funds available for the IHS Loan Repayment Program and other initiatives are maximized while also establishing parity with other federal loan repayment initiatives such as the National Health Service Corps (NHSC). Currently, as much as 20% of IHS Loan Repayment funds are consumed by tax obligations.

IHS, Tribal, and urban Indian (collectively “I/T/U”) health programs face chronic and pervasive shortages of health providers. According to a 2018 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO-18-580), two-thirds of IHS Areas encounter an average 25 percent vacancy rate of providers, with some IHS Areas having vacancy rates as high as 33 percent – including for physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, certified registered nurse anesthetists, certified nurse midwives, physician assistants, dentists, and pharmacists. By the most recent estimates, IHS is reported to have 1,550 vacancies for health care professionals. Staffing shortages have forced IHS hospitals and clinics to turn people away due to limited capacity, or fail to meet compliance standards for waiting rooms and medical transfers. Limited funding for personnel recruitment delays the hiring process and overburdens existing staff, all of which negatively impacts patient care and wellness.

By making the IHS Loan Repayment and Indian Health Professions Scholarship Programs tax exempt, it will ensure every program dollar is spent on recruiting and retaining providers in the I/T/U system. It also establishes parity between these programs and other federal scholarship and loan repayment programs that have enjoyed tax-exempt status for many years. In addition, it further honors the federal trust responsibility for health services for all American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Peoples.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue by re-introducing the IHS Health Professions Tax Fairness Act. This legislation is an important step towards addressing longstanding health provider vacancies across the Indian health system and improving AI/AN health outcomes. Please know that NIHB is committed to working with your office in moving this legislation through Congress.

Yours in Health,

Victoria Kitcheyan

Victoria Kitcheyan, Chairperson
National Indian Health Board



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