

National Indian
Health Board



November 6, 2023

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
H-232 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
House Minority Leader
H-204 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Support for \$250 million in Opioid Response Funding for the Indian Health Service

Dear Speaker Johnson, Minority Leader Jeffries, Majority Leader Schumer, and Minority Leader McConnell:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and the 574 sovereign Tribal nations we serve, we write in support of the President's supplemental funding request of \$250 million for the Indian Health Service (IHS), as part of a \$1.55 billion total investment in the fight against opioids and addiction in America. This funding is urgently needed to help Tribal communities address the severe impacts of the opioid and fentanyl crisis.

Opioids are the latest face of a mental health and addiction crisis in America that is disproportionately impacting our Tribal communities. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data show that American Indians and Alaska Natives have experienced the highest age-adjusted overdose death rates of any group for the past decade. Most of these deaths are due to opioid use, including fentanyl and fentanyl-laced substances.

In August 2023, The Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, in partnership with NIHB, hosted the National Tribal Opioid Summit in Tulalip, Washington. This convening of Tribal leaders; federal, regional, and state decision-makers; and policy experts discussed the ongoing and increasing harm opioids have on Tribal communities, and the solutions for empowerment and healing throughout Indian Country. This investment will go a long way to making a meaningful investment in these solutions.

The mental health and addiction epidemic plagues all our communities and touches all our families, regardless of status, wealth, or beliefs. Tribes seek a formal commitment from Congressional leadership that Tribal governments are federally-recognized governments, Tribal jurisdiction is American jurisdiction, and Tribes must be provided funds and empowered, as sovereigns, in the fight against hate, sadness, and hopelessness.

The President's proposal to address the Opioid Crisis is for the elected body of the People to provide \$1.55 billion in additional funding to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), including \$250 million that would be transferred to the IHS and made available for two years.

Despite the clear need in Indian Country, few federal dollars have been solely dedicated for this purpose to Tribal nations. For example, in FY 2023, State Opioid Response (SOR) funding was \$1.575 billion, and the Tribal Opioid Response Grants (TOR) were \$55 million, which is roughly 3 percent of the total. Given the impact of the opioid crisis in Indian Country, \$250 million will be a long overdue investment that will save lives for generations to come.

Despite these serious challenges, Tribal nations and Tribal health systems are innovating when it comes to behavioral health. By focusing on holistic care, traditional healing practices, and indigenous ways of knowing, we have seen remarkable results in Tribal communities for treatment of opioid use. Tribes have combined culturally centered prevention, treatment and recovery services with implementation of key evidenced-based practices, including Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) clinics for opioid use disorder; syringe service programs; training, administration, and distribution of the life-saving overdose reversal medication naloxone; peer recovery support services; outpatient therapy and behavioral health integration.

Nearly 50 years of self-determination and self-governance policy have clearly demonstrated that empowering Tribes works and results in better outcomes at the same dollar-for-dollar investment. In simple terms, good governance. Additional funding will allow Tribes to improve and expand this programming that we know is effective.

Again, we reiterate our strong support for the inclusion of \$250 million to IHS for opioid and fentanyl response. This funding could not be needed more urgently. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact NIHB's Director of Government Relations, Caitrin Shuy, at cshuy@NIHB.org.

Sincerely,

**National Indian Health Board
National Congress of American Indians
Self-Governance Communication and Education Tribal Consortium
National Council on Urban Indian Health**