

Senator Murkowski (R-AK)
Senator Heinrich (D-NM)
Senator Schatz (D-HI)
Senator Peters (D-MI)

S. 620, Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act

Background: American Indian and Alaska Native children in Alaska and the Southwest experience the highest rates of hospitalization from dog bites in the nation.¹ This public health crisis extends across Indian Country, with endemic rabies and zoonotic disease challenges particularly affecting tribal lands in remote areas. The cost burden is significant – treating a single case of human rabies exposure can reach \$20,000 per patient, requiring multiple weeks of post-exposure treatment and often requiring travel to urban areas for nearest access to care. In rural and Tribal communities, limited access to veterinary services creates a cascade of public health risks:

- Gaps in routine rabies and other vaccinations for domestic animals
- Lack of population control through spaying/neutering services
- Increased risk of zoonotic disease transmission between wildlife, domestic animals, and humans
- Compromised community safety and access to outdoor activities

The Indian Health Service (IHS) currently lacks authority to provide essential veterinary services, including rabies prevention and population control measures for uncontrolled dogs in these communities. Through a One Health approach - which recognizes the interconnection between human, animal, and environmental health - this legislation would authorize IHS to implement comprehensive veterinary public health services in areas where zoonotic diseases are endemic.

The Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act does the following:

Public Health Veterinary Services

- Amends the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to authorize IHS to provide veterinary services in areas where zoonotic diseases are endemic and the risk of transmission is elevated due to uncontrolled dog populations
- Enables Tribes to include these services in their 638 self-governance compacts with IHS

Implementation and Oversight

- Provides IHS with ability to assign or deploy veterinary officers from the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to IHS service areas
- Requires coordination between IHS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- Mandates biennial congressional reporting on program outcomes

Program Enhancement

- Directs USDA to study wildlife oral rabies vaccine delivery in Arctic regions
- Designates IHS as a co-coordinator in the National One Health Framework

The bill is supported by: the Navajo Nation, the American Veterinary Medical Association, and Best Friends Animal Society.

Contact majority staff members on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs with any questions or to cosponsor the bill:
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¹ Bjork, A., Holman, R. C., Callinan, L. S., Hennessy, T. W., Cheek, J. E., & McQuiston, J. H. (2013). Dog bite injuries among American Indian and Alaska Native children. *The Journal of pediatrics*, 162(6), 1270–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.11.087>