

**Opening Statement of  
Rear Admiral Michael Dean Weahkee  
Nominee for Director of the Indian Health Service,  
Department of Health and Human Services  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
December 11, 2019**

Thank you Senator Udall for that kind introduction. Good afternoon Chairman Hoeven, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and members of the Committee. I am joined here today by my wife, Dr. Rose Weahkee, my son Nicolaus (one of our three children, his sisters Tamia and Sofia are both engaged in finals and school commitments this week out west), my mother Glinda Weddle, my brothers Charley and Tim Weahkee, my sister Jessica and her husband Cory Weddle, as well as several other friends, colleagues, and family members who have traveled here to Washington, DC, to support me during today's hearing. I'd also like to acknowledge and honor my father, Jim Weahkee, who could not be here with us today as he is undergoing chemotherapy treatment in Phoenix, Arizona.

First, let me say that it is an extreme honor, and I am humbled to be here today. I am very grateful for your consideration of my nomination by President Trump to serve as the next Director of the Indian Health Service. I want to thank all of the Tribal leaders, urban Indian organization leaders, national Indian health stakeholder organizations, professional colleagues, and my IHS team members for the outpouring of support that I have received over the past two and a half years that I have served as the Principal Deputy Director and Acting Director of the Indian Health Service.

As I reflect back on the significant points in my life that I believe helped contribute to where I sit today, I am continually reminded of the many people whose influence played a part in shaping the person that I have become and the path that led me here.

From my mother Glinda, I learned the importance of a strong work ethic and of selfless service. From my father Jim, I inherited my 'Indian-ness' and being Zuni, and I learned the value of culture, traditions, and having a good sense of humor in life.

My maternal grandparents instilled in me a strong Christian faith and a desire for service, which led me to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and enlist in the Air Force as a young man.

Remembering my paternal grandparents, my uncle, and my aunt, who were all taken away from our family way too early, I am reminded of the terrible toll that diabetes, heart disease, alcoholism and hepatitis C have inflicted upon our native people, and why the health care path that I have chosen as my life's work is so very important. This committee is well aware that American Indians and Alaska Natives are impacted disproportionately in comparison to the United States general population for many different diseases and health conditions. My family is not immune and is representative of the issues that our patients face throughout Indian country.

I was born in one of our Indian Health Service hospitals, on the Navajo reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico. I have been a lifelong user of our system and many of my family members continue to receive their care and treatment at our Indian Health Service, Tribal and Urban Indian facilities. The IHS has transformed dramatically in many ways since its creation in 1955, but there is still much work to do to adequately meet the needs of our patients.

The mission of the Indian Health Service is to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level, and it is our responsibility to uphold the Federal Government's obligation to promote healthy American Indian and Alaska Native people, communities and cultures, and to honor and protect the inherent sovereign rights of Tribes. It is a noble mission, and it is "My Why" for working in Indian Health and it keeps me energized to come in to work and face the many challenges that confront us each and every day.

As is evident from recent news stories, our Agency continues to face many challenges, including the need to recruit and retain qualified health care professionals; maintain aged facilities and meet certification and accreditation requirements; and to overcome community issues like inadequate housing, jobs, transportation and other social determinants of health that need attention in Indian country.

In partnership with Tribes and Urban Indian Organizations, we have developed a comprehensive and aggressive five-year strategic plan for the IHS, focused on expanding access to care, improving the quality of care that we provide, and improving the management and operations of the Agency. In the past two years we have made significant strides to remove the Indian Health Service from the Government Accountability Office's High Risk List, implementing 12 of the 14

unimplemented recommendations that helped to land the Agency on the list. We have transitioned the Rosebud Indian Hospital from a facility that was on the brink of decertification by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, to now being fully accredited by the Joint Commission. And, just last week CMS conducted a recertification survey of the Pine Ridge Indian Hospital and we look forward to sharing the results of that survey soon.

If I am fortunate enough to be confirmed by the Senate, I promise to be guided by the core values of integrity and transparency. I pledge to faithfully execute the laws written by Congress, and to be responsive to your questions regarding the agency. We cannot solve everything at once, but we can make a positive, real and lasting difference in the lives and health of our patients.

Thank you for your consideration of my nomination and I look forward to answering your questions here today.