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Udall, Smith, Tester Introduce Bill to Help Tribal Communities Address Opioid Epidemic

Modeled after the Special Diabetes Program for Indians, the bill would provide Tribes with resources for substance use treatment and prevention programming

WASHINGTON — In conjunction with a Senate Indian Affairs Committee hearing today on the opioid crisis in Indian Country, U.S. Senators Tom Udall (D-N.M.), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), and Jon Tester (D-Mont.) introduced a bill to help Tribal communities in New Mexico and across the country access the resources they need to support people who are struggling with mental illness or substance use disorders.

Tribal communities have been hit hard by the opioid epidemic. According to a leading health agency, American Indians and Alaska Natives experience the highest drug overdose death rates. However, many Tribal communities don't have the resources they need to tackle this public health crisis.

The bill, the Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act, would create a behavioral health program to help Tribes develop solutions that include

culturally-appropriate efforts aimed at prevention, treatment, and recovery. The bill would create the Special Behavioral Health Program for Indians—the SBHPI—which would be modeled after the Special Diabetes Program for Indians.

"The opioid crisis has sent ripple effects through Native communities throughout New Mexico and Indian Country," said Udall, vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. "Any successful response to the opioid and substance abuse crisis in Indian Country must be driven by Tribes. Modeled after the successful Special Diabetes Program for Indians program, this bill would give Tribes the resources to find treatment and prevention solutions that work for their communities."

"Minnesota's tribal communities have been hit hard by the opioid epidemic, yet too many Native communities can't access the behavioral health services necessary to address these problems," said Sen. Smith. "We need to make sure tribes can access the resources they need to address the opioid crisis, and other mental health and substance use crises. My bill would help leaders in Indian Country create programs that leverage their unique strengths and cultural resources."

"The opioid epidemic is ripping apart families in Indian Country," Tester said. "This bill will increase access to life-saving services and ensure that tribes are able to seek culturally appropriate treatment to overcome addiction so folks can live a long and healthy life."

Led by Smith, the Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act is cosponsored — in addition to Udall and Tester — by Senators Cortez Masto

(D-Nev.), Warren (D-Mass.), and Heitkamp (D-N.D.). The legislation is also supported by the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

“The National Indian Health Board is pleased to support the Native Health Access Improvement Act which will provide important base funding for Tribal communities to address behavioral health challenges. American Indians and Alaska Natives are disproportionately impacted by mental and behavioral health issues,” said Stacy A. Bohlen, NIHB Chief Executive Officer. “Multiple factors including deferrals of care for painful conditions due to IHS funding shortfalls, exposure to violence and trauma, historical trauma, low rates of access to mental health services, and a higher prevalence of experiences with discrimination and alienation all contribute to the higher rates behavioral health challenges for American Indian and Alaska Native populations. This much needed funding will ensure that Tribal communities get access to additional resources while prioritizing culturally appropriate methods of care. As we have seen in similar models – like the Special Diabetes Program for Indians – a relatively modest investment can make major changes for Indian Country. We look forward to working with Senator Smith as the bill moves through legislative process.”

“NCAI applauds the introduction of this legislation, which provides resources to address important mental health and substance abuse issues in a culturally relevant manner,” said Jacqueline Pata, Executive Director, National Congress of American Indians.