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# Udall Leads Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing on High Risk Indian Health, Education, and Energy Programs

Committee assesses progress in addressing government watchdog's report on issues at BIE, IHS, and BIA

**WASHINGTON** — Today, U.S. Senator Tom Udall, vice chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, presided over an oversight hearing entitled “High Risk Indian Programs: Progress and Efforts in Addressing GAO’s Recommendations” to assess progress and efforts to address the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) designation of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and Indian Health Service (IHS) programs as “high risk.” Udall led the hearing as part of a series to examine how these agencies are focusing resources and expertise to improve federal Indian programs and the delivery of essential services in Indian Country. Udall pressed agency officials on how the lack of adequate information technology infrastructure is affecting their ability to complete necessary administrative and oversight functions, and he underscored how inefficient interagency coordination reduces the effectiveness of federal Indian programs.

Udall opened the hearing by sharing recent success stories from Santa Fe Indian School, the Kewa Public Health Corporation, and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute. "These success stories show the persistence and tenacity of Tribal communities. They underscore the need for better sharing of best practices within federal Indian programs. And, most of all, they should remind this committee that Tribal communities can -- and do -- succeed despite the agency-level administrative shortcomings they face," Udall said. "I would ask my colleagues here today: imagine how much more could be accomplished if their federal partners were offering them needed support instead of getting in their way?"

"For years, GAO's work has provided evidence of something many tribal communities have long reported -- that bureaucratic barriers at agencies like the BIA, the BIE, and the IHS reduce the effectiveness of Indian programs across the federal government," Udall continued.

"I read GAO's testimony today and was pleased to learn that BIA, BIE, and IHS programs have benefited from the additional scrutiny put on them since being labeled 'high risk.' It appears progress can only be made when Congress keeps the pressure on," Udall said. "The members of this committee must do all we can to address the federal government's shortcomings to improve its accountability and administration of Indian programs."

Prior to the oversight hearing, the Indian Affairs Committee reviewed and approved several bills related to Indian Country, including the Udall-cosponsored Tribal HUD-VASH Act of 2017. The bill formally authorizes a joint Tribal housing initiative between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing

(VASH) program. Native veterans are disproportionately affected by homelessness, and the Tribal HUD-VASH program would provide rental assistance, case management, and clinical and supportive services for Native American veterans living on reservations who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

**The full text of Udall's opening remarks at the oversight hearing are below.**

*Thank you, Chairman Hoeven. This hearing starts where we left off after our first hearing on the GAO High Risk Report in May.*

*Thank you for calling GAO and the BIE and the IHS back here so the agencies can update the committee on their progress toward addressing GAO's open recommendations, and so we can examine how and whether they have been adequately focusing resources and expertise to improve their Indian programs.*

*But, before I get into discussing the "high risk" designation, I want to share some information.*

*The Santa Fe Indian School has a graduation rate of 96 percent – 88 percent of their students go on to attend a postsecondary institution.*

*At the Kewa Public Health Corporation, a longer 30-minute visit standard is making visits meaningful for patients and providers.*

*In the Albuquerque Service Area, providers are tracking patient wait times electronically and deploying customer satisfaction surveys to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their patients.*

*And a team of pre-engineering students at the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute recently competed against 20 colleges from across the country, winning a national NASA Robotics Competition.*

*These success stories show the persistence and tenacity of Tribal communities. They underscore the need for better sharing of best practices within federal Indian programs. And, most of all, they should remind this committee that Tribal communities can -- and do -- succeed despite the agency-level administrative shortcomings they face.*

*I would ask my colleagues here today: imagine how much more could be accomplished if their federal partners were offering them needed support instead of getting in their way?*

*For years, GAO's work has provided evidence of something many tribal communities have long reported – that bureaucratic barriers at agencies like the BIA, the BIE, and the IHS reduce the effectiveness of Indian programs across the federal government.*

*BIE schools have reported that agency hiring directives continue to prevent them from filling key staff positions. IHS facilities in the Great Plains are still in CMS-certification limbo, as Native patients face uncertainty. And the lack of necessary, modern IT infrastructure affects everything from education to energy – grinding some Tribal communities to a bureaucratically-induced halt.*

*Unfortunately, these agencies haven't taken a proactive approach to responding to Tribal concerns. And, this "high risk" designation proves they weren't committing themselves to resolving GAO's findings.*

*I read GAO's testimony today and was pleased to learn that BIA, BIE, and IHS programs have benefited from the additional scrutiny put on them since being labeled "high risk." It appears progress can only be made when Congress keeps the pressure on.*

*That is why I appreciate the chairman's follow-through on this topic. The members of this committee must do all we can to address the federal government's shortcomings to improve its accountability and administration of Indian programs.*

*I'm looking forward to hearing what progress has been made to address GAO's recommendations and thank the federal witnesses for being here today.*