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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6450

April 14, 2010

Dear Tribal Leaders:

I write to share some very good news with you! Congress has enacted, and President Obama has signed into law, new legislation that will substantially improve health care for Native Americans. The health insurance reform legislation you've heard so much about over the past year included the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. I included it in the U.S. Senate. This is a great victory for Indian Country and one that you and I have worked for over a decade to achieve.

When I became Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I made enacting the Indian Health Care Improvement Act one of my top priorities. With your help and support, that goal has now become a reality.

As you know, many tribal communities face a real crisis in health care and have for some time. More than 18 years have passed since basic Indian health laws and programs have been updated. Technologies changed. Treatment programs and strategies evolved with new scientific discoveries. Yet, the Indian health care system which serves more than 2 million First Americans remained unchanged. For the past decade, Congress didn't even bother to reauthorize basic Indian health care programs.

Clearly, the federal government has not fulfilled its trust responsibility to provide quality health care to you, your family and your neighbors in Indian Country. The new law begins to change that sad fact.

The new law permanently reauthorizes the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. It updates and expands the services provided through the Indian health care system. It puts in place several new initiatives to improve Indian health care. For example, new, innovative, and more cost-effective ways of building tribal and Indian Health Service facilities are included in the law. Improvements in the Contract Health Services program will cover more Native Americans.

The new law also will help ensure that Native American elders are better able to live their twilight years in dignity. It authorizes, for the first time ever, long-term care, like home health care, assisted living and community-based care programs for Native Americans.

Of special importance is the new help the law provides to those struggling with mental and behavior health problems, particularly Indian youth. As Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, I held numerous hearings over the years on Indian Youth Suicides, which are epidemic in many Native Communities.

The new law establishes mental and behavioral health programs that go beyond alcohol and substance abuse. It includes programs for fetal alcohol spectrum disorders and child abuse prevention. It expands the American Indians into Psychology program and other important programs to increase recruitment and retention of mental and behavioral health care professionals in Indian Country.

The new Indian health law also includes comprehensive youth suicide prevention efforts. It streamlines the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants for Indian youth suicide prevention; authorizes tribal use of pre-doctoral psychology and psychiatry interns; creates an Indian youth telemental health demonstration project to allow Native American communities to use technology to enhance mental health and prevent youth suicides; and creates a demonstration project for youth suicide prevention curriculum programs in schools serving Indian youth, to help teachers learn to better identify youth at risk, get them the help they need, and prevent Indian youth from taking their own lives.

I have attached a document which highlights in more detail some of the significant improvements the health care reform legislation will bring to health care services provided to Native Americans. In the coming weeks, I will send you a more comprehensive document detailing how the provisions in this new law will help you and your communities.

Again, thank you for all of your work in this long overdue effort to update and reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, I will continue to make Indian health care a top priority and I look forward to working with you to continue our work to improve the lives of Native Americans.

Sincerely,



Byron L. Dorgan
Chairman