



## MEMORANDUM

February 26, 2021

TO: Tribal Health Clients

FROM: Hobbs, Straus, Dean & Walker, LLP

RE: ***IHS COVID-19 update media call***

---

On February 25, 2021, the Indian Health Service (IHS) held a call with interested media on IHS' response to COVID-19. The majority of the questions focused on vaccine distribution. Call participants for IHS were as follows:

- [Rear Adm. Michael Toedt, M.D.](#), IHS chief medical officer
- [Jillian Curtis](#), director, IHS Office of Finance and Accounting
- Cmdr. Kailee Fretland, deputy lead, IHS COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force
- Cmdr. Holly Van Lew, deputy lead, IHS COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force
- Loretta Christensen, M.D., IHS Navajo Area chief medical officer

At the start of the call, Dr. Michel Toedt, highlighted the work that IHS has done to get the vaccine distributed to the American Indian / Alaska Native (AI/AN) population. To date, IHS has distributed almost 778,000 doses of vaccine and administered 444,000 doses. This information can be found on the [IHS coronavirus website](#) and is updated weekly. Vaccine administration and distribution was slightly delayed last week due to adverse weather in much of the country. In order for patients to learn which facilities have the vaccines, the best thing to do is to call them directly, since health facilities operate locally.

One common question that came up was around vaccine hesitancy. There were questions on what IHS has been doing to improve vaccine uptake amongst the AI/AN population. IHS cited that they are working with non-profit organizations such as the National Indian Health Board and the Association of American Indian Physicians as well as other community and tribal leaders. However, tactics remain largely localized. The IHS Navajo Area Chief Medical Officer noted that they use radio outreach in both English and Navajo; Community Health Representatives; and local community tribal leaders, among other strategies.

Others asked for reasons as to why IHS has been more successful than states in distributing the vaccine. Again, IHS stressed that this answer is varies by in local area. Some examples include – direct shipment of vaccines to 288 sites; driving vaccines to various sites even during bad winter weather; one area partnered with the local Coast

## MEMORANDUM

February 26, 2021

Page 2

Guard; and in one case using a helicopter to deliver vaccine to a site at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. On Navajo nation, they are closely tracking which areas have had strong vaccine administration and which have not, and will reengage with certain areas as needed.

Another common topic area was how to ensure equity across the Indian health system with some tribes electing to receive vaccine through states and others through IHS. Yesterday, guidance was released through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that allows transfers before IHS and states. It is now possible for state to transfer between IHS and states to rectify any inequities in allocation. There is paperwork that is filled out accordingly and information to be through the Tiberius tracking system. (See attached guidance)

Several questions focused on IHS distributing vaccine to non-native populations. In accordance with their mission, IHS officials noted that they are focused on the AI/AN population. However, in the future they may have ability to collaborate with state governments. They are also partnering to make sure front line workers like teachers and law enforcement on reservations have access to the vaccine, but this would depend on the local situation and vaccine availability.

### *Conclusion*

We will continue to provide further analysis update you as COVID-19 vaccine distribution and other important vaccine-related information. If you have any questions or would like additional information on any of issues raised in this report, please do not hesitate to contact Elliott Milhollin ([emilhollin@hobbsstrauss.com](mailto:emilhollin@hobbsstrauss.com) or 202-822-8282); Geoff Strommer ([gstrommer@hobbsstrauss.com](mailto:gstrommer@hobbsstrauss.com) or 503-242-1745) or Caitrin McCarron Shuy ([cshuy@hobbsstrauss.com](mailto:cshuy@hobbsstrauss.com) or 202-822-8282).