

U.S. Sens. Smith & Cramer, Reps. Pallone & Ruiz Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Increase Mental & Behavioral Health Care Resources for Indian Health Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. [07/1/2021]—U.S. Senators Tina Smith (D-Minn.) and Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) and Representatives Frank Pallone (D-N.J.-06) and Raul Ruiz, M.D. (D-Calif.-36) introduced bipartisan, bicameral legislation to help Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities, Tribal health programs and urban Indian health organizations address mental and behavioral health needs in their communities.

Right now, only 39 percent of IHS facilities provide 24-hour mental health crisis intervention services, and 10 percent of IHS facilities do not provide any crisis intervention services at all. A survey conducted by IHS found that Tribes rated the expansion of inpatient and outpatient mental health and substance abuse facilities as their number one priority. The *Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act* would address this problem by creating a Special Behavioral Health Program within IHS to provide flexible funds that can be used to develop culturally-appropriate methods and solutions aimed at prevention, treatment and recovery.

“Before the pandemic, American Indians and Alaska Native communities were already disproportionately impacted by mental and behavioral health challenges due to historical trauma, discrimination, decades of underinvestment in Indian Health Service and more,” said Sen. Smith, member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee. **“COVID-19 has only exacerbated this problem. We need to make sure all Native communities, in Tribal and urban areas, have adequate resources to provide culturally-appropriate prevention, treatment and recovery care. I want anyone suffering from a mental or behavioral health issue to know they are not alone. We can all help break the stigma by talking about it, and then we have to go to work to get people the services they need.”**

“Tribes have long worked to address mental and behavioral health issues in Native American communities, yet a majority of Indian Health Service facilities do not provide sufficient mental health services,” said Sen. Cramer. **“Our bipartisan legislation would address this disparity by creating a program to give communities flexible funds so they can provide these important services in a tailored, effective way.”**

“Far too many tribal communities lack proper access to mental and behavioral health care services,” said Rep. Pallone, Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. **“Unfortunately, these disparities have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically increased the need for mental health care services across the country. The *Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act* will provide tribal communities and care providers with the resources and support necessary to develop readily accessible and culturally appropriate mental health care services. I look forward to working with Senators Smith and Cramer and Congressman Ruiz to get this critical legislation passed and signed into law.”**

“Tribal communities across the nation face increasingly stark health disparities, and the federal government has a long way to go to improve health care and fulfill their trust responsibility to Native populations,” said Dr. Ruiz. **“I am honored to work with Chairman Pallone to introduce this bipartisan legislation that will directly invest in a Tribal public health framework and create a special program to address the behavioral health crisis. I am determined to bring health equity to Tribes.”**

“We are grateful for Senator Smith’s leadership and recognition of behavioral health needs among Native people,” said Francys Crevier, CEO of the National Council of Urban Indian Health. **“This bipartisan legislation is essential for the 70% of Native people that reside in urban areas as access to high quality, culturally-competent behavioral health services have become even more critical over the last year with the pandemic’s devastating effects on Indian Country. We are thankful for the Senator’s inclusion of health care providers to Native people residing in urban areas in this vital program, which represents an important step towards addressing the behavioral health disparities in Indian Country. We look forward to continuing to work with the bipartisan cosponsors of this critical initiative.”**

“Tribal Nations and our citizens continue to face high rates of behavioral health issues, caused by myriad factors, including centuries of generational trauma resulting from colonization and hostile acts of the United States government,” said Chief Kirk Francis, President of the United South and Eastern Tribes Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF). **“And yet, we continue to lack substantial and sustained funding to address these challenges for current and future generations. As the collective trauma of living through the COVID-19 public health crisis only exacerbates and intensifies these issues, it is critical that Tribal Nations are equipped with the resources necessary to bring healing and recovery to our communities. USET SPF strongly supports the creation of a Special Behavioral Health Program for Indians and looks forward to working with the bill’s sponsors on ensuring that Tribal Nations will have full self-governance authority under the program, in accordance with trust and treaty obligations.”**

This legislation is also supported by Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.), Ben Ray Luján (R-N.M.), Sen. Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) and Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.).

The *Native Behavioral Health Access Improvement Act* is endorsed by the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH), National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc.

You can read a summary of the bill [here](#) and bill text [here](#).