



National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

“Strengthening the Spirit”

November 2003

Department of Health and Human Services Opening Ceremony,
Washington, D.C.

“The Spirit of Health and Heritage”

by

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OS



PHS

ACF



AOA

CDC

CMS

FDA

HRSA



IHS



NIH

SAMHSA

Good morning. The month of November has once again been designated by Presidential proclamation as a time to recognize and honor the contributions of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the unique culture and greatness of America.

I welcome you to the Opening Ceremony for Heritage month as we begin our celebration of the great spirit of Indian people. Our theme this year, Strengthening the Spirit, reflects on all of your efforts in support of the programs of the Department of Health and Human Services that have, over the many years of our history, helped strengthen the spirit and the health of American Indians and Alaska Natives across the country.

In 2 years we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the transfer of the Indian Health Service (IHS) to this great health department. In 1955 many young American Indian men and women could not pass the physical and health standards to join the military forces of our nation. Now they can—and do so in proportionally greater numbers than any other population group in the United States. In 1955, the federal workforce of American Indian and Alaska Native people was essentially non-existent. Today the Department of Health and Human Services boasts an American Indian and Alaska Native workforce of 17 percent, most of them serving in the IHS. In 1955, the participation of tribal governments in the decisions of the Department that affected their lives was not a priority and if their participation was even considered, it was not routinely considered. Today, Operating Divisions across the Department have tribal consultation policies and the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs has a Senior Advisor for Tribal Affairs and a tribal

government liaison function – as do a number of Department divisions and agencies. And the Department’s budget formulation process continues to strengthen the consultation with tribal government representatives to listen to their presentations on health priorities and recommendations, before funding requests are developed.

The Department, its employees and leadership, has earned great credit for its unprecedented focus on programs benefiting Indian people and for investing in programs that have demonstrated their effectiveness for raising the health status of Indian people. For example, the Special Diabetes Program for Indians received a \$50 million increase, for a total of \$150 million each year, and the authorities for that were extended until 2008. The Department also requested \$20 million more for the Agency Sanitation and Facilities Construction program. The Secretary also revitalized the Intradepartmental Council on Native American Affairs. This has been a huge effort

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within the Department to bring the health and social service issues of Indian country to the attention of the leadership in the Department. Among its activities, the Council undertook a Grants Access Study to inventory and determine how many HHS programs were being accessed by Tribes. The study indicated that HHS has 315 programs that offer grant funding. Of the 315 programs, Tribes are eligible for 125, or about 40% of grants offered by the Department. Of the 125 programs, Tribes are only accessing 85 of them. In 2004, the Council will begin to look at why Tribes are not accessing the other 40 grant programs.

There are many more projects and programs that are benefiting all Americans and American Indians and Alaska Natives throughout the Department. And they would not be happening if not you're your support, work, and dedication. To highlight some of them would be a disservice to those not mentioned, for all of the programs and grants and collaborations are extremely important to the health of the people in Indian Country. Employees of agencies across the Department demonstrate a depth of enthusiasm for improving the quality of life in Indian Country that is sincerely appreciated. I believe that as you so actively help others you are also strengthening your spirit.

Through the programs of the Department the spirit, and health, of Indian people has been strengthened. It is this spirit that we will continue to nurture, and to strengthen, in order to continue improving the quality of life for American Indians and Alaska Natives and to help Indian nations sustain their sense of identity, traditions, language, and cultures.

President George W. Bush said, "Our Nation's rich cultural diversity reflects our Constitution's core vision of freedom and justice for all." American Indians and Alaska Natives have contributed their language, their philosophy, and their lives to this great nation of ours. It is only fitting that we set aside one month a year to honor an extraordinary culture, heritage, and spirit – which has enriched us all.

Thank you for being here today and thank you for all that you do for the American people and for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

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