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Secretary Kempthorne: Federal Partnership will Assist Island Leaders in Strengthening Public Health Care Systems

HONOLULU, Hawaii – Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne told leaders of the U.S. territories and freely associated states at a Sept. 29-30 Insular Area Health Summit that the federal government is committed to working with them to improve their health care systems, underscoring that commitment with a federal task force to prioritize their critical health care needs and multi-million dollar funding to support on-going efforts.

The island leaders responded to the Secretary's initiative by joining federal officials in a Joint Statement of Resolve, affirming their commitment to improve the health and well being of island citizens by supporting the task force, known as the Interagency Coordinated Assets for Insular Health Response, in its work and collaborating to find solutions to strengthen the islands' human resources for health.



Defense Under Secretary Chu, DOI Secretary Kempthorne, VA Secretary Peake, HHS Assistant Secretary Garcia Sign Interagency MOU at Summit.
[Photo Credit: Tami Heilemann]



“I want to assure you that the federal government recognizes its role and responsibilities in helping you to improve the state of health care facilities and the delivery of health services in the insular areas,” Kempthorne said at the Summit. “That is why we – your federal partners – are here to listen and learn and explore strategies for helping you to advance your health care sector.”

The Secretary was joined by senior federal health officials, including Secretary of Veterans Affairs James B. Peake, M.D., Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David S.C. Chu, and Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Health Joxel Garcia, M.D.

Island leaders included President Manny Mori of the Federated States of Micronesia; President Litokwa Tomeing of the Marshall Islands; Vice President Elias Chin of Palau; Governor Togiola Tulafono of American Samoa; Governor Felix Camacho of Guam; Lt. Governor James Aiona of Hawaii; Northern Mariana Islands Secretary of Health Joseph Villagomez; U.S. Virgin Islands Health Commissioner Vivian Ebbesen Fludd, RN; and U.S. Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress Donna M. Christensen, M.D.

The Joint Statement of Resolve pledges to 1) work cooperatively to improve the physical infrastructure for health care; 2) seek ways to make available medical equipment, pharmaceuticals and supplies needed to support the work of the many dedicated health professionals in the U.S. insular areas and freely associated states; 3) create opportunities for the communication of ideas, initiatives, and approaches among the leaders and representatives of the U.S. Federal Government, the U.S. affiliated insular areas and the wider health care community; 4) increase efforts to reach out to other partners who can advance the improvement of health care in the islands; and 5) coordinate resources as partners and encourage private sector participation in the pursuit of improved health care programs and services that best meet the needs of the diverse island communities.



To demonstrate the federal commitment, Kempthorne announced several funding initiatives to bolster the islands public health care systems, including \$834,000 to strengthen the Guam Memorial Hospital's exterior walls and expand its medical supply warehouse; and \$100,000 to the American Pacific Nursing Leaders Council, which serves the Pacific insular areas, to establish an administrative office at the University of Guam.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs James B. Peake announced that a \$4.5 million contract has been awarded for the construction of a clinic on Guam to serve the health needs of veterans there and in other Pacific insular areas.



Kempthorne said the Federated States of Micronesia will also receive \$21.5 million in fiscal year 2009 Compact of Free Association funding through Interior to operate the departments of health in its four states of Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae and Yap. The funding provides the financial backbone of the country's health services, paying the day-to-day costs of hospital operations, salaries of medical professionals, replacing medical equipment and operating clinics in the islands. Chuuk State is receiving an additional \$1.9 million to deal with a public health emergency that will require significantly greater resources to resolve over the next several years.

The Republic of Palau will receive \$13.3 million in Compact funding in 2009, some of which goes to support their health ministry, while the Republic of the Marshall Islands will receive \$7.4 million in Compact funding to support the day-to-day functioning of its health ministry in fiscal year 2009. An additional \$1.7 million will address the medical needs of the Marshallese community on Ebeye Atoll.

Kempthorne noted that Interior has allocated \$154 million in grants to support health-care infrastructure in the islands since 2006. This funding has helped to build new facilities and to underwrite the purchase of equipment and the funding of programs to provide better patient care.



The Interagency Coordinated Assets for Insular Health Response -- made up of representatives of the departments of Interior, Health and Human Services, Defense, and Veterans Affairs, will assess the health care requirements of each territory and freely associated state in consultation with appropriate leaders from these areas and develop a priority list of actions that address the most critical needs. The task force will be a sub-working group of the Interagency Group on Insular Areas, established by President Bush on May 8, 2003.



Kempthorne said another strategy to provide long term support for the 13 island hospitals is to reach out to stateside hospitals to create a kind of hospital-to-hospital support system. "I am discussing this idea with the American, Catholic, and District of Columbia Hospital Associations," the Secretary said, "and I am hopeful we can encourage stateside health care professionals to volunteer their time and skills in these areas."

The White House Office of USA Freedom Corps has established a new interactive volunteer link on its website called the "Insular Health Initiative," Kempthorne noted, and will serve as a one-stop site to connect health care volunteers with volunteer opportunities in the islands.

The agreement for the Interagency Coordinated Assets for Insular Health Response is on-line at http://www.doi.gov/news/08_News_Releases/insular_health_summit/

The Joint Statement of Resolve is on-line at http://www.doi.gov/news/08_News_Releases/insular_health_summit/joint_statement.html

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