



## Listening Session with Senator Tim Johnson (S.D.)

Welcoming Remarks by  
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Good morning. I appreciate Senator Johnson's invitation to join him at this tribal listening conference.

The value of consultation cannot be underestimated for establishing a vision for Indian health and developing ways to make that vision a reality for American Indians and Alaska Natives. These listening conferences are another way for tribal voices to be heard.

It is important that tribal priorities be shared so that a national strategy can be developed or strengthened to improve the health of Indian people.

At the national level, the health status of Indian country can be guided by things such as data collection and analysis, health surveys, and research results, but many additional health priorities and solutions come from you. You humanize the cold statistics and help us see your community and the challenges it faces.

It is important to increase understanding of how national priorities or policies are interpreted and implemented at the regional and local level – and if they need improvement or change. Your ideas for making improvements or changes are critical so that the Congress, the Administration, and the Indian Health Service can use your input to reach decisions that can sustain our programs, establish new ones, and improve the health of our people.

Many of you, or your representatives, have shared your wisdom and presented your recommendations for change through the legislative process – specifically, through the tribal-consultation process that developed proposed language for the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. Through that process you conveyed your blueprint for shaping the future of Indian health care programs for years to come.

Senator Johnson is a member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, which has begun holding hearings on the proposed reauthorization bill, and his is a strong voice for the nine South Dakota Tribes and also for the interests of all Tribes in relation to improving the health status of their members. His advocacy for Indian programs and honoring the treaties between the Federal Government and Tribal Governments is respected.

And he knows that there are some government programs that can help Tribes increase their self-reliance, and is also quick to note when government programs do not contribute toward that goal and, in some cases, can never be of any real benefit to the poorest communities of the nation – two of the top five being reservations in South Dakota – because there is no business, education, or economic infrastructure in which to invest.

As the Director of the Indian Health Service, I share Senator Johnson's concern and desire to identify ways to improve the health status of Indian people. Among my responsibilities is serving as the Vice-Chairman of the Department of Health and Human Service's Intradepartmental Council of Native American Affairs.

One of the goals of the Council is to expand tribal participation in more of the 320 programs the Department has to offer. I am sure that the Senator would agree with me that Secretary Tommy Thompson also shares a commitment to improving the health status of Indian people. As Secretary Thompson said to the Council: "We must do more with our existing programs to make them work better for Native Americans and consult with our partners to improve our policies and services to their communities."

*The text is the basis of Dr. Grim's oral remarks at the Listening Session with Senator Tim Johnson in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, on Friday, August 22, 2003. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.*

It is one of my beliefs that to improve the health status of all Americans, we must do more health promotion and disease prevention. Providing our people a higher quality of life for many years can only be accomplished through supporting programs that will help them make positive behavioral and lifestyle choices. We will continue our treatment programs, but our goal is to eventually reduce the demand for treatment because our people are living longer, healthier lives.

Sustaining a health promotion program cannot be done in isolation from other factors that influence health status. Factors such as education level, employment opportunities, community development, environmental health, and cultural support can drastically affect lifestyle choices and behavioral patterns, and consequently, health status.

The socioeconomic problems and lifestyle factors underlying the decreased health status of Indian people are entrenched, long-standing, and pervasive, and therefore difficult to eradicate. That is why it is important that we work together and that we work with others, such as Senator Johnson, to build the infrastructure of our communities so that all these interrelated factors come together in balance for mutual benefit.

We can learn from each other, but only if we listen with an open mind and a caring heart. It is a privilege to be here today at this listening session with Senator Tim Johnson to listen and learn from you.

Thank you.