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National Native American Youth Initiative

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“Leaders for Tomorrow”

by

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Good Afternoon. I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I am always glad to meet and speak with the future Indian health care professionals and the leaders of tomorrow.

My name is Charles Grim. I am a doctor of dentistry. I am also the Director of the Indian Health Service, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. Indian Health Service provides comprehensive, culturally-sensitive, and high-quality direct health care services to over 1.6 million American Indians and Alaska Natives. Our health care system consists of a network of 12 Area offices and 155 service units throughout the United States.

I welcome all of you here today, and to those of you from other parts of the United States -- welcome to the nation’s capital. I hope you have all taken the time to get to know your fellow future leaders. It is important to learn from one another and to continue friendships that you develop here. As we plan our journey through life, we never know where we will be tomorrow or years from now. It is important that we maintain our links with one another because there will be opportunities in the future where we can help one another.

When I was your age, I never envisioned that one day I would be the leader of a federal health agency with responsibility for fulfilling the United States treaty obligations to Tribal Nations. Somewhere among the youth of today is someone, possibly one of you, who will be surprised 20 or 30 years from now, to find yourself leading this agency. But any success, although it may come as a surprise, does not happen accidentally. It comes to those who are prepared and ready for it. So you must prepare yourself throughout your life to reach your goals, and make choices today that will not limit your opportunities to fulfill your potential or to achieve your dreams.

As the youth of today looking to your tomorrows, you face many challenges. Across our nation, the effects of increasingly sedentary lifestyles and obesity rates are taking their toll

The text is the basis of Dr. Grim’s oral remarks at the National Native American Youth Initiative Meeting in Rockville, Maryland on June 22, 2004. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.

on our youth, as diabetes rates are becoming alarming high, especially among Indian youth. Many American Indian and Alaska Native youth are starting to think of someday getting a diagnosis of diabetes as inevitable. But that does not have to be the case. American Indians and Alaska Natives are almost three times more likely to have diabetes as other Americans, and nine times as likely if their mother had diabetes when she was pregnant. But it does not have to happen. Exercise and choosing a healthy diet can reduce and in some cases eliminate the risk of developing diabetes later in life. As a future health care leader, you may someday be in charge of helping others make these changes and maintain healthy lifestyles, and you must begin by setting a good example. Of course, to be successful and happy in life, you must have a healthy body as well as a healthy mind. So it is important that you make changes in your diet and lifestyle now, to ensure your future good health, to set a good example, and to prevent a lifelong struggle with diabetes. I have watched this struggle take place among too many patients, among too many children, and among too many of my loved ones. Once you are diagnosed with diabetes, you will have that diagnosis for the rest of your life.

Another challenge for today's youth is making the right and healthy choice of abstaining from alcohol and substance abuse. The rate of alcoholism-related deaths for Indian youth is heart-breaking – over 12 times that for the general population. And substance abuse continues to be a leading contributor to health problems among American Indians and Alaska Natives. The world you envision for yourself and your people today will never become a reality if you abuse alcohol and drugs. It can end your life, or lead to a jail term, and quickly shatter your dreams.

It is always heartbreaking to realize there are Indian children who will never be able to meet even life's simplest challenges; that they never will be able to achieve what you have achieved and will achieve in your lives -- because they were born with debilitating physical challenges or mental disabilities as a result of a parent who abused alcohol and illegal drugs. Or born from a mother who abused alcohol and illegal drugs and developed such a strong addiction that she could not even stop during her pregnancy. You can help others understand that drugs are not a solution, and help them to seek other ways to handle life's problems.

And as you successfully meet the challenges that will come your way, you can also help make a difference in the lives of others. Working as an Indian Health Service nurse, doctor, administrator, or in one of the many other health care positions, you can make a real difference in the lives of others, and a real difference in our ongoing efforts to eliminate the many health disparities our people face. Nationwide, American Indian and Alaska Native people continue to experience health disparities and death rates that are higher than the rest of the nation, not only from alcohol-related diseases and diabetes complications, as I mentioned before, but also in accidental deaths, homicide, suicide, and infant mortality, among others. You can help us eliminate, once and for all, these unacceptable and devastating disparities that have plagued our people for far too long. This is the reason we in the Indian Health Service have made health promotion and disease prevention programs and initiatives a top priority.

Employees of the Indian Health Service experience not only an exciting and fulfilling professional career, but also personal enrichment, as they live among the native cultures and heritages of any of over 560 federally recognized Tribes in rural and urban locations across the nation. With hospitals and clinics in 35 states to choose from, you can work and play in some of the most exciting places in our country. You can use your leisure time to climb a mountain, swim a lake, hike an ancient path, walk through a flowered meadow, watch a whale break through icy waters, or even visit Disneyland, as you pursue your health career in IHS and Tribal sites from sunny California to the Alaskan arctic. There are also many opportunities for

professional growth and advancement, as you help us meet our important mission of raising the health status of American Indian and Alaska Native people to the highest possible level.

I invite you to join our team; to make a difference; to enrich your own lives as you improve the lives of others.

Wherever you decide to go, or whatever you decide as a career path, remember— we are all one team. We can help one another. As you meet and talk to health care professionals and other students, remember this is an opportunity not only to learn about possible careers, but to build bridges and alliances that will extend past today and into decades from now. One of you may be the future Director of the Indian Health Service, or the President of the United States, or director of another Federal or Tribal agency.

Realize also that while becoming the President of a country or director of a federal agency are lofty goals, there are many other ways of measuring success. Each of you will be a success if you achieve your dreams. Each of you will be a success if you make a difference in the lives of others. One important measure of success is just being a good son or daughter, friend, parent, or elder. The positions we hold are not as important as the place we have in the hearts of those we love and who love us.

I invite your suggestions for how the Indian Health Service might improve our programs or prepare for the future. My door is open to new ideas. I am reminded how a group of Indian teenagers wanted to make a difference in the health of youth in their community. They had recognized the link between diabetes and nutrition and sought to change the government subsidized lunch program in Native schools - so they traveled to the Congress of the United States and testified on what they thought could be changed. And they visited the Department of Agriculture and told them as well. And changes were made. They made a difference.

I welcome your ideas for tomorrow. When I was your age, I dreamed of my “tomorrow” too – and now it is here. There are so many challenges and opportunities today that those of my generation are sometimes so busy dealing with immediate issues that we may not have time to think of a new or different tomorrow. And so we rely on you to help us change our course - to the future that you want it to be. As you take our places, I hope you continue to listen to the young to give you guidance for the journey to their tomorrow.

Thank you.