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Indian Health Service Observes 30th Anniversary of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act

September 2006 marks the 30th anniversary of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA), which is regarded as the cornerstone legal authority for the provision of health care to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The IHCIA was approved by Congress on September 30, 1976, as Public Law 94-437.

“From the beginning of the Tribal-federal relationship, the provision of health care services to Indians has been a key component of the federal government’s trust responsibility,” said Dr. Charles W. Grim, Director of the Indian Health Service (IHS). “The Indian Health Care Improvement Act has been extremely effective in helping to serve this responsibility by improving the services and facilities of federal Indian health programs and encouraging maximum participation of Indians in these programs.”

The IHCIA also is notable because it complements the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 by providing Tribes with additional means of taking on the direct management of health programs for the benefit of Tribal members. The success of this legislation is demonstrated by the fact that more than one-half of the IHS budget is currently contracted directly by Tribes. Provisions in the IHCIA have led to many improvements in health indicators for American Indians and Alaska Natives. However, overall statistics show that American Indians and Alaska Natives still trail the general population in overall health. Life expectancy for Indian people is still 2.4 years less than the general population.

Although the IHCIA technically expired on September 20, 2000, it has been supported by Congress each year in the appropriations process.

“We continue to anticipate reauthorization of the IHCIA and appreciate the sustained support of this legislation demonstrated in Congress and by Tribal Leaders,” said Dr. Grim.

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