

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday, July 22, 2008

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HHS Secretary Leavitt Travels to Alaska to Advance Rural Health Initiatives

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Mike Leavitt is visiting southern Alaska this week to strengthen efforts to enhance health care delivery to Alaska Native communities and to observe best practices in the region.

The three-day trip, which begins today, includes visits to two Alaska Native villages and two regional Tribal health consortiums to better understand the challenges of access to care; meetings with Tribal leaders to discuss the health care goals of the Alaska Native people; and demonstrations of how telemedicine and telehealth are employed to increase access and quality of care to Alaska Native communities.

The use of telemedicine and telehealth is making an important impact on improving access to health care in rural Alaska. Telemedicine is being used to exchange medical information from one site to another via electronic communications to improve patient health. Telehealth is the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical health care. By utilizing telemedicine and telehealth, patients who live in rural Alaska have better and timely access to critical care through medical specialists, such as cardiology, pediatrics and radiology.

“While Alaska faces unique access to care challenges, the health care delivery systems in place serve as model of effective telehealth and telemedicine for other rural communities,” Secretary Leavitt said. “I look forward to continuing my work with local, state, and tribal leaders to address barriers and increase access to care.”

Secretary Leavitt will also meet with health care providers, employers, and insurers to discuss the health care challenges in Alaska and the transformation of the current health system into a system that delivers high quality care at low cost. This bold vision for the health care system includes advancing interoperable health information technology; measuring and publishing price information to give consumers information they need to make better decisions on purchasing health care; measuring and publishing quality information to enable consumers to make better decisions about their care; and promoting incentives for quality and efficiency of care.

On Thursday, Secretary Leavitt will present Acting Health Commissioner Bill Hogan the National President’s Challenge Award. Alaska was one of five states which had the highest participation rates in the nation based on population. The National President’s Challenge, which kicked off March 20 and concluded May 15, was a six-week program launched by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness

and Sports to encourage Americans to be more active. Participants were able to register as individuals or with a team and set goals, log their activity and track their progress. To complete the challenge, participants 18 and older needed to be active 30 minutes a day, while youth aged 6-17 needed to be active an hour a day.

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Note: All HHS press releases, fact sheets and other press materials are available at <http://www.hhs.gov/news>.