



National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

November 9, 2005
HHS Great Hall
Washington, D.C.

“Respecting Tradition, Embracing a Healthy Future”

by

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Good Morning and thank you for joining us for this annual National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month celebration here at HHS. We are delighted to have the opportunity to share some of our diverse Native cultures with you. The White Oak Singers, Joanne Shenandoah, and Billy Mills today will present a wide perspective on the cultures and realities in Indian Country, past and present.

The Indian Health Service is pleased to present the Heritage Month theme for November 2005: “Respecting Tradition, Embracing a Healthy Future.” We at the IHS, who count some 70 % of our staff as tribal members, represent hundreds of tribes and communities with diverse histories and cultures from throughout our nation. Yet we work with a common purpose to restore a bright and healthy future for our people. The Indian Health Service is a major component of the government-to-government relationship between Indian Nations and the United States Government that begins with our U.S. Constitution and continues through countless Supreme Court decisions, executive orders, and other actions. Millions of acres of land, which allowed this nation to expand, and untold natural resources, which are the basis of

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our national wealth, were ceded by the tribes in exchange for continuing health care, education, and other necessities.

Unfortunately, little of this history and relationship is known by our citizens. But I am encouraged by the presence and educational mission of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, which recently celebrated its first anniversary just a block from here in its prominent location. The museum's current exhibition of major Indian treaties calls out in vivid detail some of what I've just described.

As the Indian Health Service marks its 50th anniversary this year, we have seen a steady improvement, decade by decade, in leading health indicators. Yet clearly we see that much remains to be done because American Indians and Alaska Natives trail other Americans in nearly every health category. But with the help and willing partnership of many other HHS agencies, we are making advances in the treatment of diabetes and other critical health challenges in Indian Country. Within the Department of Health and Human Services, many effective health promotion partnerships and cooperative efforts have been established in recent years, including continued partnerships with CDC and NIH in the areas of diabetes research, treatment, and prevention, and with the Administration for Native Americans on 21 Tribal and Urban Child and Youth Grant projects. In partnership with *Administration for Children and Families'* national Head Start program, the IHS supports children and families through preventive health services such as family wellness, obesity and diabetes prevention, health and safety, and oral health.

In many ways we also are increasingly telling our patients to respect and return to their traditions. Eating healthy traditional foods, such as you'll sample later, and getting regular vigorous exercise as our ancestors did, is the very best medicine for the mind and the body. It's good that Indian Country is listening intently to the current dialogue on fry bread and other questionable foods borne of the necessity of surviving on 19th Century government commodities.

While we must focus on the present and future health problems and issues, Native people also must remember lessons and good habits from the past. As Oglala Lakota Chief Luther Standing Bear said: "The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, pueblos, or mesas. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers; he belongs just as the buffalo belonged."

Thank you for your kind attention. We hope you enjoy the rest of this morning's program.

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