

To: All IHS Employees

From: Yvette Roubideaux, M.D., M.P.H.  
Director, Indian Health Service

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Subject: Message from the Director – Customer Service

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I am writing to discuss a topic that came up quite frequently in our process for gathering input for Internal IHS reform: **Customer Service**. Many comments were submitted that indicated a need to improvement in two areas:

1. How we treat our patients
2. How we treat each other

In terms of **how we treat our patients**, I have some personal experience with this issue. I have been treated both well and rudely as a patient in our system. I have experienced the caring and thoughtfulness of some of our providers and staff. I have also experienced dismissive and rude behavior by other providers and staff. I have experienced how hard it is to figure out what the “rules” are for receiving and accessing care in our system, especially when accessing a new facility, and have on occasion been treated rudely or dismissively when I did not know the rules. **Now that I am the IHS Director, I am writing to say that rude, dismissive, and unhelpful behavior by any of our staff toward our patients is unacceptable.**

Accessing care in the IHS is complicated. There are rules about when you arrive at the clinic, how you schedule appointments, how you get medications, how you get referrals, complex rules about what we pay for and do not pay for, and how to get follow up. Sometimes, our patients are treated as if they should know what to do or they are blamed for not knowing what to do. And sometimes the rules change without notice or reasonable notice. But the fact is that no one can fully understand what they need to do to access care in our system without help, especially if they are sick, worried or new to the clinic. Actually, it is our fault if our patients do not understand how to access the system – it is evidence that we have not done our job well.

I would like to thank all the staff in our system that treat our patients with dignity and respect and go out of their way to be helpful to our patients. I would like to say to everyone else that I expect all staff to treat our patients like we would want to be treated ourselves. Please be as helpful as possible, answer everyone’s

questions in a nice way, do not assume patients know the process, help them understand how to access our system, and provide clear and understandable information in a respectful manner. Please respect their right to privacy and their right to receive care in our system. A smile or a positive comment goes a long way. **Customer service is a part of everyone's job in the IHS.**

In terms of **how we treat each other**, I have experienced the kindness, helpfulness, and willingness of some of our staff to go the extra mile to achieve our mission. I have also experienced myself and heard about rude, disrespectful and dismissive behavior towards our fellow employees. I have heard about and experienced myself the impact of unprofessional behavior by IHS staff in my work inside and outside the system. **Now that I am the IHS Director, I am writing to say that we need to treat each other with kindness and respect, and we need to work together in a professional manner.** Our efforts need to be focused on doing all we can to provide the best care for our patients and doing our business and work in an outstanding and professional manner. Rudeness, disrespect and unprofessional behavior, such as bullying other employees or people who work for us, are simply unacceptable behaviors. It is unacceptable for all of us, including employees, health providers, staff, managers, contractors, and our organizational and community partners. Certainly, all of us have our good and bad days. But that does not give us the excuse to treat each other badly.

Customer service applies to how we treat each other, and how helpful we are to one another as we do the work of this organization together. I have received a HUGE number of comments saying we need improvement in this area. I am asking you all to think about how you interact with and treat others as we go through the work day. **We are each other's customers in this organization.**

Thank you to all of you who are positive, who treat people with kindness and dignity, and who try to be as helpful as possible to your co-workers and collaborators. I am grateful for how you help us achieve our mission in a positive and professional manner. For those of you who recognize that you may not have treated others well, I thank you for your efforts from now on to improve. For those who do not recognize that you are a part of the problem, I will be grateful for when you recognize that you can help all of us by doing a better job. Just think how nice it would be to work in an organization where everyone is positive, treats everyone with respect and dignity and acts in a professional manner. Today is the first day for all of us to work towards this goal.

Thank you,

Yvette Roubideaux, M.D., M.P.H.  
Director