



## **National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month**

### **Opening Ceremony**

November 2, 2011  
Great Hall, Hubert H. Humphrey Building  
Washington, D.C.

### *Native Youth: Connecting Cultures and Wellness*

by

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Good morning, and thank you for joining us for this annual Department of Health and Human Services National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month celebration. We are delighted to have this opportunity to share with you some of the rich and diverse heritage of Native people. The Black Bear Singers, D.J. Vanas, and Cody Blackbird are both entertaining and enlightening as they share cultural music and perspectives here today.

The 2011 Heritage Month theme is: “Native Youth: Connecting Cultures and Wellness.” Our Native youth are the hope of our future, but we know they face a host of increased social, economic, psychological, educational, and cultural stressors that impact on their health and wellness.

At the IHS, we are working to coordinate resources across a broad range of federal, private, and tribal agencies and organizations in order to effectively address these complex issues. It is especially important that we listen to and involve Tribes and tribal communities in dealing with these issues, since each community has its own individual challenges and strengths to consider in addressing these difficult problems. And we must find ways to help our youth establish and strengthen their ties to their family, community, Tribes, and heritage. Connecting youth with their culture and communities has been shown to provide an effective barrier against many of the adverse and often devastating consequences of the increased burdens our youth have to bear.

At the IHS, we are dedicated to providing access to quality healthcare that will help create a healthy future for American Indian and Alaska Native people. The Indian Health Service is a major component of the government-to-government relationship between Tribal 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 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 that every year the month of November is dedicated to shedding light on the history and culture of American Indian and Alaska Native people.

As with our youth, the issues that contribute to health disparities among American Indians and Alaska Natives of all ages require addressing an entire spectrum of socioeconomic, psychological, judicial, and political issues, as well as individual lifestyle changes.

Over 2 years ago, when I assumed the role of Director of the IHS, I set four priorities to address these issues and to guide our efforts to change and reform the IHS. Over the past year, we have made some significant strides in accomplishing these goals as we work to improve the health of American Indian and Alaska Native people. We have made progress on renewing and strengthening our partnership with Tribes, reforming the IHS, improving the quality of and Access to care, and making all our work transparent, accountable, fair and inclusive. We still have much to do, but progress is being made.

I am optimistic that in this time of hope and change, we have an extraordinary opportunity to look at what we are doing and come up with some creative solutions to our most difficult challenges.

While our focus is on present and future health problems and issues, Native people can also contribute to their own health and wellness by remembering and learning from the past.

In many ways we are increasingly telling our patients to respect and return to their traditions. Eating healthy traditional foods, such as you'll sample later today, and engaging in regular physical activity 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 the importance of establishing healthy habits for a lifetime, and responding with many community initiatives and programs that address lifestyle issues.

I believe that we are at a point in history where we have an extraordinary opportunity to make significant strides in improving the health of American Indian and Alaska Native people. We have a supportive President, bipartisan support in Congress, and a lot of very appreciated support from Secretary Sebelius and all the HHS Operating Divisions and Staff Divisions, as well as a strong call for change from our communities and our patients. I hope you all can join us in some way in this critical work over the next few years.

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of this morning's program.