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## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6450

July 24, 2014

The Honorable Sylvia Burwell  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Madam Secretary:

I write to express my concerns about the unmet needs of the Indian Health Service regarding staffing shortages at all levels of the Agency. In particular, I am disturbed by the number of Area Director positions that are now filled with "acting" Directors. It is difficult to understand how the Agency will affect change if it does not have these key leadership positions filled with permanent staff.

Of the twelve Indian Health Service Regions, four now have Acting Area Directors, including the position in Billings, Montana. I have also heard the frustration from the tribes in the Phoenix and Tucson Regions regarding the vacancies in those two regions. These three regions alone represent a significant amount of the IHS service population. The ability of these Regions to deliver quality health care to this population is impacted by the kind of leadership they have, and it would appear to me that the Agency is satisfied with temporary leadership. I can assure you that I am not satisfied.

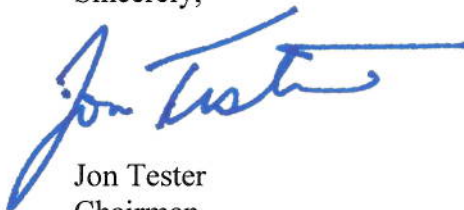
At a Senate Committee on Indian Affairs field hearing in Billings, Montana, earlier this year, testimony revealed the challenges associated with lack of leadership at the top levels of the agency, including ineffective communication, lack of a strategic vision, uncertainty of purpose, and low employee morale. Again, these problems directly affect the quality of care that American Indians and Alaska Natives receive and more work must be done to resolve these issues.

I urge you to take all necessary measures to fill the vacant Area Director positions. I also request that you provide a written response detailing what specific actions the Indian Health Service and the Department of Health and Human Services plan to take to remedy the chronic inequitable staffing levels that exist throughout the agency. If there are legislative proposals that you believe would allow you to fill these positions more quickly, please feel free to share those as well.

As you know, the federal government has a special relationship with American Indians and Alaska Natives that is rooted in the Constitution, treaties, federal statutes and Supreme Court

decisions. The federal government must do more to ensure that we are living up to our treaty and trust responsibilities to our first Americans. I look forward to your response. Please contact Kenneth Martin on my Committee staff at (202) 224-2251 or via email at [kenneth\\_martin@indian.senate.gov](mailto:kenneth_martin@indian.senate.gov) should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester  
Chairman