

National Indian Health Board



December 6, 2019

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chair, Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Udall
Vice-Chair, Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Support for Nomination of Rear Admiral Michael D. Weahkee as Indian Health Service Director

Dear Chairman Hoeven and Vice-Chair Udall,

On behalf of the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), I write today in strong support of the nomination of Rear Admiral (RADM) Michael D. Weahkee to serve as the Director of the Indian Health Service (IHS). In his current capacity as Principal Deputy Director, RADM Weahkee has demonstrated solid and capable leadership, determination, and commitment to honoring the federal Trust responsibility for health and towards raising the health status of AI/AN Peoples to the highest level. NIHB is confident that he will demonstrate similar resolve and fortitude as Director, and will continue to strengthen the government-to-government relationship between IHS and Tribal Nations.

Established in 1972, NIHB is a national, inter-Tribal organization that advocates on behalf of all federally-recognized Tribal governments for the fulfillment of federal Trust and Treaty obligations to deliver health care and public health services to all AI/AN Tribes and Peoples. NIHB is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of elected or duly appointed Tribal representatives from all twelve IHS Areas. In our capacity as the only national Tribal organization dedicated exclusively to addressing Tribal health care and public health priorities, NIHB has had extensive opportunity to work closely with RADM Weahkee and gauge his qualifications for IHS Director.

RADM Weahkee has successfully led IHS during highly turbulent and trying periods. For instance, during the most recent 35-day federal government shutdown – the longest in U.S. history – RADM Weahkee maintained open communication channels with Tribal governments and organizations providing timely updates, documenting Tribal challenges and concerns, and extending available resources to mitigate the shutdown's impact on AI/AN communities. In this same vein, RADM Weahkee has traveled extensively throughout Indian Country to meet one-on-one with Tribal leaders and learn first-hand about the unique obstacles Tribes face in addressing health disparities to help inform IHS's strategic priorities. Recently, RADM Weahkee announced that IHS has made significant progress in securing an exceptional apportionment from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to help alleviate the adverse impacts of continuing resolutions (CR) on the agency's ability to meet its fiscal obligations to Tribal governments.

In addition, he has proven to be thoughtful and collaborative in his leadership approach by establishing closer partnerships with other federal agencies to better leverage resources for Tribes and break down federal silos. For instance, RADM Weahkee joined with the Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans, Jeannie Hovland, to revamp the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Interdepartmental Council on Native American Affairs so that HHS agencies are working more in tandem to address Tribal health priorities.

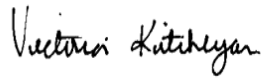
Further, he has taken important strides to fortify IHS's relationship with its multiple Tribal advisory committees (TACs), such as by personally attending TAC convenings to build stronger Tribal connections, and by ensuring IHS is providing meaningful and timely responses to TAC recommendations. Similarly,

under his leadership, the quality of IHS-led consultation and listening sessions have improved, as RADM Weahkee has displayed a great willingness to integrate Tribal feedback and priorities into IHS's policy development.

Importantly, RADM Weahkee has prioritized addressing many of IHS's long-standing and destabilizing quality of care issues. Under his leadership, IHS has acted on recommendations from the Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office to establish an Office of Quality within IHS Headquarters to improve oversight and accountability of IHS Area Offices and facilities. In addition, he effectively shepherded the development and implementation of a new five-year strategic plan for the agency – the first in over a decade – and is actively partnering with Tribes to update the agency's Tribal consultation policy.

Overall, RADM Weahkee has proven to be an adept and inclusive leader who has earned the trust and confidence of Tribal Nations. For these reasons, NIHB strongly supports his confirmation as the next Director of IHS.

Yours in Health,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Victoria Kitcheyan".

Victoria Kitcheyan, Chairperson
National Indian Health Board